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Yu Shimizu

ILLUSTRATION

Asagi Tohsaka

The
DEMON SWORD MASTER
of Excalibur Academy





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The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy Yu Shimizu

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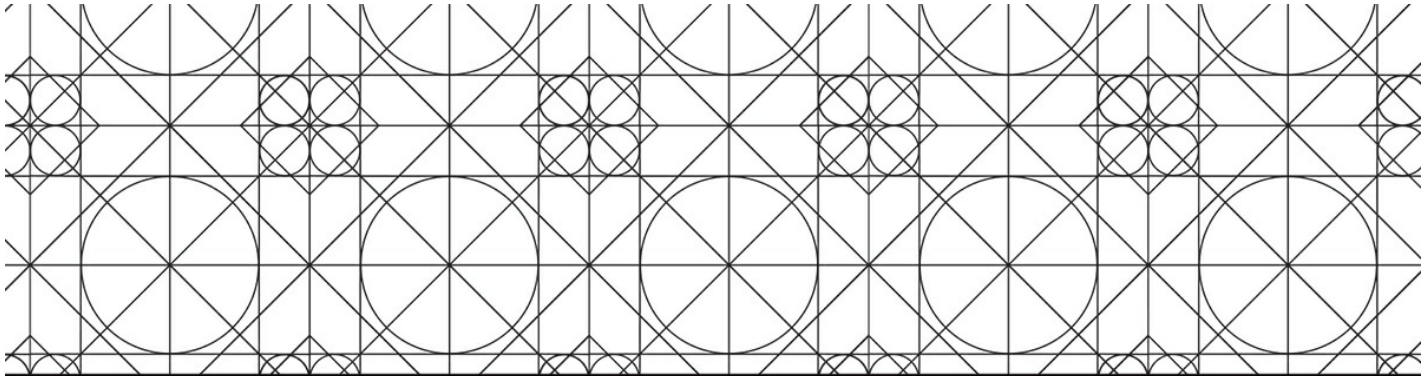
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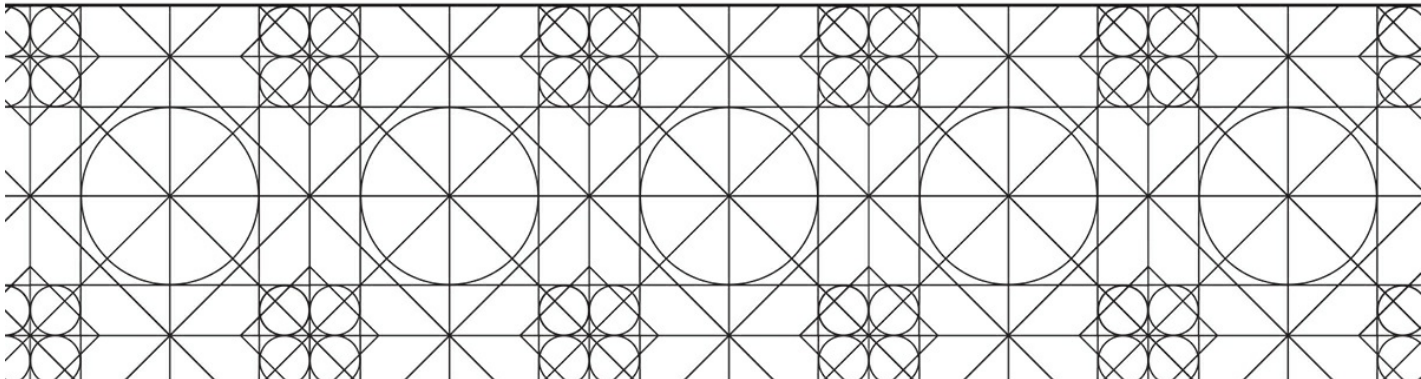
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The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy

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PROLOGUE

“...It can’t be. Rivaiz Deep Sea, the Lord of the Seas?!” The Dragon Lord’s voice echoed through the empty chamber.

The girl standing opposite Veira—the true master of the Azure Hold—stared her down coldly.

“What brings you here, Dragon Lord?” she asked silently. “As I recall, you were struck down by the Six Heroes, and your carcass was left behind to freeze in the tundra...”

“Huh?” Something menacing shone in Veira’s eyes as she narrowed them at the throne and its occupant. “I should be the one asking you that question.”

Veira’s gaze was intense enough to snuff out a lesser being, yet Rivaiz remained unbothered. She returned the Dragon Lord’s stare with one of her own that could freeze all in creation. Her amethyst-colored hair gave off a faint phosphorescent glow.

A water-colored mantle was draped upon Rivaiz’s dainty limbs, granting her an ethereal appearance. However frail she seemed, no ordinary being could withstand the Dragon Lord’s murderous ire head-on.

No chance of her being a fake, then. Veira gritted her teeth.

There was no mistaking it. The girl sitting on that throne was her peer, one of the eight Dark Lords who sowed chaos and destruction across the world. She was the ruler of the demonic oceans, and a monstrous embodiment of a cataclysm. Such was Rivaiz Deep Sea, the Lord of the Seas.

What is she doing in my Azure Hold? Veira pondered as she watched the usurper of her throne cautiously.

How had the defeated Lord of the Seas returned?

I suppose it’s not so strange. Leo and I survived, after all.

Considering Rivaiz's exceptional powers, it was baffling that the Six Heroes had bested her in combat to begin with. However, this begged a question: Was she friend or foe to Veira now?

Once, they had been united beneath the Goddess of Rebellion's banner. Following the demise of the former Dark Lord, Zol Vadis, the new Dark Lords were rivals who competed for dominion. They all sought to take each other's lives. It was that constant infighting that allowed the Six Heroes and the human forces to defeat the Dark Lords' Armies.

But Rivaiz and I never competed much.

Veira's base of operations had been situated in the Demon Dragon's Mountain Range. No realm could have been more dissimilar from Rivaiz's. Thus, the Dragon Lord and the Lord of the Seas clashed only on rare occasions.

Just what is she thinking?

Veira had never been able to anticipate Rivaiz's thoughts. Her face was like a frozen mask, completely devoid of emotion. With no better option, Veira's only option was to ask directly.

"What are you doing here? The Azure Hold is my castle."

The Lord of the Seas shook her head slowly. "This is your castle no longer. I have taken this abandoned ruin into my possession."

"Do you intend to make a fool of me?!" Flame burst to life, and Veira's crimson hair billowed with it, embers blowing from her locks and dropping to the stone floor. "This is a castle of the dragonkin! The place my minions guarded with their very lives—"

"You were never the rightful owner of the Azure Hold to begin with," Rivaiz interjected.

"What?" Veira snarled. "And you are?"

Rivaiz shook her head. "...Nay."

"Huh? What are you saying—?"

Before Veira could finish, the girl on the throne raised her hand gently.

“Sharianos.”

“...?!”

A flurry of countless ice blades assailed Veira, who instinctually defended herself by enveloping her arm in fire and swatting the attack away. The ice blades evaporated into thin air. Veira’s crimson hair raged, casting a heat shimmer around her.

“You fool... Do you want me to reduce you to ashes?” the Dragon Lord spat.

“Your presence here is a violation of providence,” the frigid beauty replied. “I must advance my plans.”

Veira cocked an eyebrow. “What plans?”

Vrrrrnnnn! Vrrr, vrrr, vrrr!

Intense tremors shook the chamber as though in reply. Countless tendrils burst from under the stone floor.

“You never could hold a conversation to save your life!” Veira shouted.

Azra-Ael, the Devil of the Underworld, had been an eccentric sort with odd schemes, but at least it was possible to reach an understanding with them. The same could not be said for the Dark Lord of the Seas.

“Fine, then. I’ll just beat the answers out of you.” Veira licked her lips. The flames around her arm solidified into an incandescent broadsword, a feat of sorcery unique to dragons. This was the Blade of Incinerating Light, Varg Varua, a weapon that easily sliced through firm stone walls.

Schlrplrplrplrp!

A flurry of tentacles rushed toward Veira. A horizontal motion with her blade destroyed them all to the last, however.

“Do not underestimate the Dragon Lord, Rivaiz Deep Sea!” Veira roared.

A furious blaze raced for the throne, swallowing the girl sitting upon it.

“Refraia!”

The flame of Veira’s dragon breath, capable of reducing all of creation to ash, was doused by a water barrier.

Fighting here puts me at a disadvantage. Veira clenched her teeth, loath to concede the weakness.

In terms of sheer power, the Lord of the Seas was among the strongest of the Dark Lords. Hers was a wrath not to be incurred. To engage her in the belly of the ocean, at the very heart of her domain, was the height of folly. As bitter as she was to admit it, Veira needed to escape this battlefield.

“Argh Varheiz.” Rivaiz unleashed an eighth-order spell from her spot on the throne.

Bwooooooosh!

A great torrent of water crashed over Veira, but a moment later, the ocean trembled and a terrible howl echoed through the Azure Hold. Rubble was blown into the air, and from within it emerged a gigantic crimson dragon.

This was Veira Dragon Lord’s combat form.

Veira opened her jaws wide, breathing silvery heat and light upward.

Boooooooooom!

The blast tore a large hole in the ceiling. Spreading her massive wings, the crimson dragon soared away. She burst through the barrier surrounding the Azure Hold and disappeared into the dark depths of the ocean.

The Dark Lord climbed through the water, wreathed in undying fire. Her breaching the surface formed a great whirlpool, and she continued higher into the storming sky above.

The heavens belonged to dragons. Veira was out of Rivaiz’s grasp here.

Something dark like shadow moved beneath the waves—a mass of writhing tendrils that rivaled a continent in size. This was the Lord of the Sea’s main body, the great creature that had sunk the Oceanic Kingdom of Giran’s invincible fleet and destroyed the underwater civilization one thousand years ago.

I’ll destroy you! There won’t be a speck left of you, Lord of the Sea!

Gnashing her fangs, Veira prepared to cast the strongest dragon tongue spell at her disposal.

The Flame of Ruin, Herald of the End Times! Feel my roar, fool! Dei Argh Dragray!

A white flash blotted out the sky, gouging into the ocean!

Bwoooooooooooooosh!

A giant pillar of fire burned to the heavens, blowing away the storm clouds. The sea boiled over, with the remains of marine life floating up to the surface. Fading mana glow streamed from Veira's jaws. For all of the attack's intensity, the Dragon Lord didn't expect that it had defeated Rivaiz, her equal.

Let's see how well you handle another hit!

As Veira prepared another powerful strike...

WHIIIIIIIIISH!

...a luminous bolt streaked from the water, penetrating Veira's wing. Sizzling dragon blood spurted like blossoming flower petals.

What?!

Was this a counterattack from Rivaiz?!

No... This is something else.

Another massive shape rose from the depths. A long-abandoned palace surfaced, glowing deep blue. It was the aerial fortress that had fallen during the Six Heroes' savage attack a millennium ago.

The Azure Hold is active?!

Veira's golden eyes widened in the face of this impossible event. Only she, the master of the castle, could command it. That power should have been beyond a mere usurper like Rivaiz.

But that flash was surely the Azure Hold's main armament—the Ragva Cannon!

Bwoooooooooosh!

The raging sea did nothing to slow the Azure Hold's ascent into the sky. Its climb caused the air to tremble and sent powerful waves in all directions.

Then Veira noticed a figure standing beneath the Azure Hold's gate.

A human?! Veira growled, furious and disbelieving.

Yes, a human. A tall, middle-aged, dignified man clad in what looked like an army uniform.

Is he the one who activated the Azure Hold?

Veira's draconic instincts warned her that this was no ordinary mortal.

That he would attack me makes it clear he is an enemy!

Veira opened her jaws again, preparing to unleash another scorching breath. However, her raging flames were blocked off by an invisible wall.

The Azure Hold's defense mechanisms!

Veira roared in indignation. The human employed the Azure Hold's functions better than she ever had.

"..."

The man's mouth moved, but Veira couldn't hear the words over the sounds of the sea and the wind. When he had finished, he leveled his index finger at the great dragon.

What is he—Kuh, aaaaah!

Suddenly, everything went white, and Veira's consciousness became muddled.

He's trying to...dominate my mind...?!

This wasn't sorcery; normal spells had no effect on dragons. This power was different.

Is this...the goddess...Roselia's power...?

There was no resisting it. Veira's consciousness dimmed, and as it did, she recalled *his* features for some reason.

Why...why am I...remembering his face...?

"Grr... Grr... Ooooooooooooooooooooooh!"

The crimson dragon's howl shook the heavens.



“That one truly was mighty enough to be called a Dark Lord,” the white-haired hero whispered as he watched the Dragon Lord fly off. “To think she broke through my Holy Sword’s power.”

Even a Dark Lord wouldn’t normally be able to oppose his Holy Sword’s abilities. That much was certain, for he’d been able to subjugate Rivaiz Deep Sea. Yet somehow, the Dragon Lord had eluded his domination.

How she had achieved it was unclear. Perhaps it was the result of a mystic power unique to the dragons. Yet while he’d failed to dominate her, the Dragon Lord would still be driven to a wild, berserk state.

Next time, he wouldn’t fail.

Events have strayed too far from the goddess’s prophecy. I imagine the apostles are starting to panic.

The white-haired man had beaten the goddess’s apostles to the punch and claimed the Azure Hold and the Lord of the Seas. He’d anticipated that the Dragon Lord would come after she awoke from the ice block, but encountering her so soon was a stroke of luck.

Or perhaps it was the goddess who influenced this course of events. I must obtain the Dark Lords before the apostles do...

Only four Dark Lords remained. The Lord of Rage had been consumed by the maddened Swordmaster of the Six Heroes, and the Undead King was still missing after his supposed resurrection in Necrozoa. Perhaps his reincarnation had failed, leaving his soul no shell to properly adhere to.

The man fixed his eyes on the distant sky. Where was Veira Dragon Lord headed in her frenzy?

“Pursue her, Rivaiz Deep Sea,” the white-haired man commanded of the Dark Lord who ruled the vast oceans below.

CHAPTER 1

THE MYSTIC-EYED GIRL

“Oh, Lady Selia, what are we going to do? This is horrible; just look at Sakuya —”

“Shhh. Just leave her be for now.”

“Huh...? B-but, I can’t help worrying...” Anxiety and confusion showed plainly on Regina’s face as she whispered.

The girls were in the common room on the Hræsvelgr dorm’s first floor. A variety of dishes covered the table: pancakes, a fresh vegetable salad, corn cream soup, ham and eggs, and yogurt with strawberry jam. Regina had prepared each selection, guaranteeing they would be delicious.

It was an ordinary breakfast for the eighteenth platoon, save one unusual problem.

“...Kuh... It hurts... My eye hurts...” Sakuya was mumbling to herself from a spot at the end of the table. She had the palm of one hand pressed over her left eye, and her brow was knit in pain. “...I...I can’t suppress it... Kuh... Calm down...”

A fashionable black patch covered the girl’s left eye. Although an unusual accessory, it suited Sakuya nonetheless. A pretty girl like her might have looked good in anything, but that didn’t make the unusual adornment any less conspicuous.

“Why an eye patch, though? Do you think Sakuya’s gotten into trends?” Regina whispered into Riselia’s ear.

“Hmm... It must be that syndrome. You know, the one unique to fourteen-year-olds,” Riselia whispered back.

“Syndrome?”

“You know what I mean. It happened to me, too. Remember when I wrapped my arm in bandages for no reason, modified my uniform a little, and started putting on colored contact lenses?”

“Oh, right! You did act kind of weird!” Regina answered, recalling her mistress’s old strange behavior.

“I tried to come up with all sorts of cool names for my Holy Sword for when it would manifest, too.”

“Yeah, I kind of remember a few from that notebook I found when cleaning your room...”

“A-anyway! This behavior is a pretty typical phase for young teenagers. Let’s just watch over her as she works through it.”

“Ahhh. Understood, I suppose...”

Leonis listened to the exchange and cast a glance at Sakuya.

It seems she’s adapting to the mystic eye I gave her.

The girl still struggled to control it properly, but her body hadn’t rejected the eye outright, and that was a good sign. Once Sakuya fully acclimated to the mystic eye of time, it would take on her original eye color, too.

Though whether she fully masters its power depends on her natural talents...

Static crackled as a voice blared from Excalibur Academy’s PA system.

“The Seventh Assault Garden is currently sailing through the waters of the Former Archipelago of Weiria.”



Following the announcement, Leonis felt the ground tremble noisily beneath his legs.

“The former Archipelago of Weiria... It should be around here,” Elfiné said, calling up a map of the sea on her terminal.

The Seventh Assault Garden had moved away from the continent’s shores and was sailing northward. Its destination was the heart of the Human Integrated Empire, the First Assault Garden that served as humankind’s greatest bastion—the Imperial Capital, Camelot.

Under normal conditions, the Seventh Assault Garden wouldn’t be due to return to the capital for another seven months. However, the Sakura Orchid god sealed beneath the city had been stolen during a recent attack, robbing the mana furnace of most of its output.

In its present state, the Seventh Assault Garden was incapable of fulfilling its duties as a weapon meant to locate and destroy Void Hives. Its date for return was moved up so the weakened mana furnace could be replaced, but also so the city could undergo maintenance.

The Seventh Assault Garden moved only because it was still docked with the Sixth Assault Garden, Alexandria, which was effectively towing it. Also, to reduce power consumption, the Seventh’s production facilities and large commercial buildings had been shut down. Excalibur Academy’s training field, which was normally capable of changing terrain, was also inoperable.

Naturally this extended to creature comforts such as the Hræsvelgr dorm’s air-conditioning, too.

“...We’re taking quite the long way around,” Leonis remarked, puzzled as he observed the chart on the terminal screen.

Elfiné nodded. “Yes, we have to avoid running into Void Reefs.” Several red points dotted the map of the ocean. These marks denoted areas called Void Zones, locations of probable Void activity. The two Assault Gardens sailed a course that bypassed the Void Zones. “At our current speed, we should reach the capital in about four days.”

“And if we get there in time, we’ll be able to attend the Holy Sword Dance

Festival,” Riselia added.

“Oh, right. Last year we had to watch it via a relay drone, and the image quality was almost unwatchable. But this year, we’ll be able to see it live. I’m looking forward to it!” Regina pumped her fists, eyes glistening.

Hmm. The Holy Sword Dance Festival. A fascinating ritual.

The Holy Sword Dance Festival was a combat tournament held once a year in the capital, with participating representatives from every Assault Garden. The capital’s students came from the illustrious Elysion Academy, while the Fifth Assault Garden’s entrants hailed from the Anti-Void Research Institute. The Fourth Assault Garden dispatched contestants from the Academia, the Second Assault Garden’s hailed from the Military Instruction School, and the Human Church’s came from St. Eluminas Monastery.

However, the largest Holy Swordsman-rearing facility was unquestionably the Seventh Assault Garden’s own Excalibur Academy.

Each educational establishment selected only the most accomplished from among its ranks to participate in the Holy Sword Dance Festival. And while the members of the eighteenth platoon hoped to compete one day, they couldn’t at their present rank. Regrettably, they’d have to wait at least another year for the right.

Leonis thought it for the best. He didn’t want to draw undue attention to himself; thus, involvement in a highly publicized event was not something he longed for.

Still, he did enjoy watching displays of martial prowess. During his reign as the Undead King, Necrozoa’s colosseum hosted tournaments in the name of the goddess Roselia Ishtar.

While Leonis reminisced upon days long past...

“Riselia! The eighteenth platoon captain, Riselia Crystalia!”

...a girl with platinum blond hair suddenly burst into room.

“Wh-what...? Fenris?” Riselia turned around, eyeing the arrival suspiciously.

Standing there, glaring with hands on her waist, was Fenris Edelritz of the

executive committee.

Looking a bit on guard, Riselia asked, "What do you want...?"

"Come with me now. The president of the executive committee is calling for you!" Fenris insisted, pointing a finger at Riselia's face.

"...Huuuh? Th-the president?!" Riselia's ice-blue eyes widened in disbelief.

"Lady Selia, did you do something to get yourself in trouble?" Regina whispered.

The leader of the eighteenth platoon shook her head. "N-not that I know of..."

"Maybe it's because you added watercresses to the school's vegetable garden without permission?"

"Or maybe it's because you broke a Void Simulator during training?"

"Th-that was an accident!" Riselia countered. "Ah, perhaps it's because I took a milk bath a while back..."

"Right, that must be it, for sure!" Regina agreed. "Maybe it clogged or ruined the dorm's plumbing!"

"No, it's none of those!" Fenris shrieked.

"Then why...?" Riselia questioned.

"I don't know the details. Look, just come with me to the executive committee!"

"...Fine." Riselia stood after a sigh.

"Ah, Miss Selia, what about morning training...?" Leonis asked.

"You're right, Leo. Why don't you come with me?"

"I don't mind." Although his external response was calm, Leonis celebrated internally.

The president of the executive committee was effectively the top authority in Excalibur Academy.

Taking this chance to gain influence over him isn't a bad idea.

The Dark Lord smirked wickedly, already working at a calculated scheme.



With Fenris leading them, Riselia and Leonis entered the Central Tactical Tower, where the executive committee was located. Excalibur Academy's premises were so vast that the three had had to travel the distance between the dorms and the headquarters in small vehicles rather than by foot.

"Hang on tight, Leo."

"O-okay..."

Sitting in the vehicle's back seat, Leonis had wrapped his arms around Riselia's waist. Her flowing silver hair had tickled his cheek.

"Oh my. You haven't gotten a vehicle license yet?" Fenris inquired from her own vehicle.

"I haven't had the opportunity," Leonis replied.

"Well, I won't claim it's a necessity, but it does make getting around the city much easier."

"..."

Leonis not having an opportunity to seek a license was only half true. The other issue was that, at his present height, the Dark Lord was too short.

Riselia, who was aware of that issue, giggled. "You'll be able to drive one soon, Leo. You're still growing," she assured him, then she kicked against the ground and took off. "In a year or two...you might be taller than me."

"Yes, maybe..."

Being an Undead Minion, Riselia would never age or physically mature. Perhaps Leonis was imagining things, but the girl's voice sounded a bit lonely.

After about fifteen minutes, the group arrived at the Central Tactical Tower. They boarded an elevator and went up to the twenty-ninth floor, where the executive committee's headquarters was stationed. The elevator's open window offered an aerial view of the Seventh Assault Garden.

"I'll call the president now." Fenris rang the doorbell.

A voice from inside beckoned the three to enter.

Leonis's eyes narrowed. *They speak with a friendlier tone than I expected.*

The automatic doors opened, and a young man greeted Leonis, Riselia, and Fenris.

"Ah, well met, Lady Riselia—oh, and I believe it's my first time meeting you." The young man made sure to squat a bit before bowing to Leonis.

The president wore an Excalibur Academy uniform and an executive committee armband on his sleeve, just like Fenris. Most eye-catching of all was the visor he wore over his eyes. Leonis detected some trace amount of mana emanating from it. Evidently, it was a kind of magical apparatus.

"I am the president of the executive committee, Oberth Baldanders."

"Leonis Magnus." The former Undead King returned Oberth's bow.

The leader of the executive committee stood above all other Excalibur Academy students. Compared to a Dark Lord like Leonis, his position was quite trifling, but as an underclassman, Leonis figured it wouldn't hurt to show due respect.

"My eyes are a bit bad, you understand," Oberth explained, tapping on his visor. "I can't take this off. My apologies."

"Oh, no offense taken at all." Leonis shook his head. Since Oberth was the president of the executive committee, he surely wielded a powerful Holy Sword, but Leonis didn't recall ever seeing him fighting Voids.

Does this mean his Holy Sword isn't suited for direct combat?

It was possible his Holy Sword was focused on data analysis, like Elfiné's Eye of the Witch.

If that's the case, I can't afford to be careless around this man.

Leonis's mana obfuscation should have been undetectable, but there was no telling what Holy Swords were capable of. It wasn't beyond imagining that one might discover Leonis's true identity regardless of his attempts to disguise it.

"Now, come on in, and take a seat." Oberth got to his feet and motioned for his guests to enter.



“We ended up laying a great deal of trouble on your shoulders, what with the Liat incident. As president of the executive committee, I extend my apologies to you.” Oberth bowed his head while seated in a meeting room chair.

“You don’t have to apologize, sir,” Fenris said, brow furrowed.

Oberth shook his head. “I can’t claim to be completely unrelated. He was a member of my executive committee, after all.”

“What’s Mr. Liat’s condition...?” Riselia inquired.

“The Demon Sword doesn’t seem to have had any long-lasting effects on him. You can rest easy.”

That relaxed the worry on Riselia’s face. “I see...”

“Let’s move on to the reason you’re here,” Oberth stated, his eyes glinting behind his visor.

Riselia fixed her posture, looking a bit nervous.

“We’ve received a directive from the capital’s senate. Your eighteenth platoon is invited to participate in the Holy Sword Dance Festival as a special entry in the tournament.”

“Huhhhh?!” Riselia’s ice-blue eyes shot wide with shock. “U-us? In the Holy Sword Dance Festival?!”

“...?” Leonis, meanwhile, raised an eyebrow, suspicious.

The Holy Sword Dance Festival. The very same elite tournament that they had discussed earlier this morning. Only the highest-ranking platoons were chosen to participate. What did “special entry” mean?

“Hmm. Why us...?” Riselia asked hesitantly.

“Well, I wouldn’t know. But if I had to guess...,” Oberth said, raising an index finger. “Lady Riselia, your recent awakening to your Holy Sword has sent quite a stir through the capital’s rumor mill. Especially your involvement with the fourth princess’s rescue aboard the *Hyperion*.”

“R-really?”

“Yes, that, and your upbringing as Edward Crystalia’s daughter, a miraculous

survivor of the Void Stampede six years ago. Your father was a great hero to the empire, and your awakening to your Holy Sword drew a lot of attention.”

“I...see.” Riselia nodded, her expression conflicted.

A wise girl like her surely realized the implications of this right away. She was being used as a symbol to raise morale.

That does feels like something humans would do.

Long ago, the Rognas Kingdom had celebrated Leonis and his comrades as heroes and saviors. It was a practice to unite people under a single banner, and it seemed that centuries had not buried that tactic.

A hero’s daughter, who overcame tragedy to find her Holy Sword. What’s more, Riselia was beautiful, even setting Leonis’s bias aside. Her looks were certainly another factor that couldn’t be discounted.

“Of course, the executive committee doesn’t intend to force you,” Oberth stated. “Should you refuse, we’ll inform the administration bureau of your decision. What do you say?”

Riselia considered her choices for a moment.

“Hmm, I’m very honored by the offer, but I need to consult with my other platoon members first,” she said.

“Oh, by all means. Go ahead and do so. However, please remember that we don’t have much time.”

“I will, thank you.” Riselia bowed deeply.

Leonis automatically lowered his head, too, but upon realizing that a Dark Lord should not give a show of submission so easily, he straightened back up.

Fenris gave a doubtful look.

“This is all very sudden,” Riselia confessed. “If I’d been informed sooner, we would’ve had more time to prepare.”

“Well, your entry was decided very late in the game. The Seventh Assault Garden wasn’t scheduled to return to the capital this time of year, after all.”

“...I see.”

“That’s all I had to tell you. Think it over and return when you have an answer. Fenris?”

“Yes, I will escort them downstairs.” At Oberth’s prompting, Fenris led the way out, her gait utterly prim.



After leaving the executive committee building and parting from Fenris, Leonis and Riselia headed for an indoor training facility. Riselia had her minion training.

“So, Miss Riselia, what do you intend to do?” Leonis questioned as he held up his student ID to the door’s scanner.

“Participating in the Holy Sword Dance Festival is a great honor,” Riselia answered. “Even if it is just an excuse to show me off.”

“You want to compete, then?”

“Assuming everyone else agrees. What about you, Leo?”

“I don’t mind, but...” Leonis trailed off. Truth be told, he didn’t want to be in the public eye. However, Riselia would surely be disappointed if he didn’t participate.

Besides, involvement isn’t without merit.

On the way to the training facility, Riselia had told him that the winning platoon would receive a large sum of prize money, as well as an audience with the royal family the following day. The former was trivial to Leonis, but being able to freely meet the royal family was appealing.

I suppose I’ll just support the others in a way that won’t stand out too much.

“I’ll go get changed,” Riselia said, heading off into the locker room to don her training outfit.

Left alone, Leonis looked around. This space was smaller than their usual training facility, and its walls looked more fragile. Substantial practice using sorcery and Holy Swords would be impossible here.

Well, we can just stick to basic training. Fundamentals are always important.

It reminded Leonis of his younger days, when he practiced with a sword day and night. Back then, the man who'd rescued Leonis from an alley in the Rognas Kingdom's refugee sector had inducted him into the knight order and worked him nonstop.

"...Hmph." Leonis frowned at this unpleasant recollection.

What's the use in remembering him? I've mostly forgotten my human life by now... Maybe it's because I fought him.

It was a bitter conclusion, but one Leonis couldn't deny. The Swordmaster of the Six Heroes, Shardark Shin Ignis, had been a hero and Leonis's teacher a thousand years ago. In the present age, however, he'd returned as a Void Lord, and Leonis had been forced to fight him.

Shardark's power was still grand, perhaps even more so than before. He'd overwhelmed Leonis. By fusing with Dizolf, one of Leonis's fellow Dark Lords, Shardark became immune to the Demon Sword Dáinsleif's power. This left Leonis incapable of defeating him.

But then, I awakened to the power of my own Holy Sword.

A Holy Sword. Leonis looked at his own hands. With eyes narrowed, he parted his lips.

"Activate."

The word was spoken in vain. Nothing happened.

...Why?

Leonis hadn't been able to summon the weapon since its first appearance. He'd asked Riselia if there was a trick to it, but...

"Hmm... Well, you need to imagine it in your head. The shape of the Holy Sword and the way you'll look holding it. Like, aiyah!"

...all he got was a vague answer.

Leonis had trouble visualizing his Holy Sword because it was a gun, an armament that hadn't existed during his time. The first time he saw one was in the Grand Mausoleum, when he met Riselia. She'd used a weapon fashioned after a Holy Sword—the Ray Hawk.

During his lectures at the academy, Leonis learned that a Holy Sword was the manifestation of one's soul. So why would Leonis's take such a foreign shape? His body was human, but his spirit was still that of the Undead King...

Just what are the Holy Swords...? Leonis furrowed his brow while leaning against the training room's wall.

"—ord, my lord—"

Leonis felt a tug on his sleeve and was very nearly yanked to the floor. Looking down, he saw a girl in a maid's outfit peering up at him. She was submerged in his shadow from the neck down.

"...What is it, Shary?" he asked.

"I come bearing a report, my lord!"

Leonis nodded, and Shary rose from within his shadow with a hiss.

"Hmm. Is it urgent?"

"It concerns the matter you ordered me to investigate: the imperial capital's underground organizations. I could tell you later if now's a bad time."

Leonis glanced at the locker room door. Beyond, Riselia was still getting ready. Surely he had enough time for a report.

"No, I'll hear it now. Just keep it brief."

"Understood." Shary began to read from the document in her hands. "There are currently countless underground enterprises operating in Camelot, but the most well known among them are the demi-human organization known as the Sovereign Wolves; the Old Imperial Alliance, which opposes the three royal houses' control; the Apocalyptic Cult and the Void Salvation Gospel, both of which follow doctrines claiming that the Voids are saviors of humankind; and the Isha Weapons Firm, a secret society that's existed since the former empire period, but its true identity is uncertain."

"Hmm. It seems the empire possesses many internal enemies."

Despite having a common foe in the Voids, true unity evaded humanity. In that regard, humankind hadn't changed in the last thousand years. During Leonis's era, people had come together only because of the Six Heroes' strong

leadership.

“And you said that some view the Voids as saviors?”

“A thousand years ago, some humans saw their deliverance in you and asked to become undead, my lord.”

“...Yes, I suppose that’s true.”

Every age had its eccentrics. As Leonis thought about it, he remembered that Zemein, the Mad Alchemist, and Schteizer, the Underworld Knight, were both humans who betrayed their kind to become undead.

“For now, leave those Void worshippers for later. I doubt there’s any point in talking to them.”

“Very well, my lord.”

“Begin by trying to incorporate all those anti-imperialist armed organizations into the Dark Lords’ Armies. If they swear allegiance to me, good. Those who resist are to be purged without exception. Use them to set an example and instill terror in Zol Vadis’s name.”

“Yes, as you will.” Shary bowed her head.

“Allow Lena Darkleaf to act as mediator and handle preliminary negotiations.” The dark elf girl was clever. Leonis believed she was the right fit for the job. “As for her bodyguards, have Arle Kirlesio accompany her... And send Sakuya, too.”

“...You mean the swordswoman you gave the mystic eye of time to?” Shary asked, watching Leonis peevishly.

“Is there a problem?” Leonis cocked an eyebrow.

“Oh, not at all. I was merely thinking that you’re very indiscriminate when it comes to creating minions, my lord!” Shary puffed up her cheeks and looked away, pouting.

“Sakuya is not a minion, but an ally,” Leonis corrected. He hadn’t branded Sakuya with the seal of a minion as he’d done with Riselia. Rather, Leonis had merely called upon her strength as an ally.

“Hmmm. I see. So the Vampire Queen is special in that regard,” Shary shot

back, her voice prickly.

“Well... Yes, I suppose so.”

Leonis wouldn't have gifted her with the True Ancestor's Dress if she weren't unique among his servants.

Shary puffed up her cheeks again. “Hmph. So she *is* special... I see...”

“Is that all for your report?” Leonis asked, glancing in the direction of the door to Riselia's locker room.

“Yes, for the time being. Ah, there's one more thing I need to confirm. Are we still going to let that elf hero do as she pleases?”

“Mm? Oh, well...”

Arle Kirlesio. Like Leonis, she was a disciple of the Swordmaster Shardark Shin Ignis. She'd infiltrated the Demon Wolf Pack to assassinate the Dark Lord Zol Vadis. And since she wielded Crozax, one of the Arc Seven—the Dark Lord-slaying weapons created by the gods—Leonis couldn't afford to be careless around her. However, at her current strength, she was no threat to Leonis.

He was curious about her, though. Leonis had tried to access her memories using sorcery, only to find himself rebuked by another's presence. Leonis believed Arle had found her way to the present era via the Spirit Forest's Elder Tree, but it seemed another faction was connected to her presence here.

And Arle herself is ignorant to that fact.

“Should you order it, I could assassinate her,” Shary offered.

Leonis shook his head. “There's no need for that. Just maintain a close eye on her. Incidentally, how is Blackas doing?”

“He's recovering at a good pace and devouring the shadows,” Shary replied.

During the battle with Shardark, Leonis had overworked Blackas, so the great wolf was resting in the Realm of Shadows for the time being. He would need to consume many shadows to regain his full strength.

“I see. I'll go visit him later.”

“He mentioned that he'd like to eat some fish for a change,” the assassin maid

appended.

“Understood. I’ll ask Sakuya for some dried fish.” Leonis nodded. “Shary, remember that, with Blackas away, you are my only pair of eyes out there. I’ll need you to work even harder than ever in the capital. I’ll be counting on you.”

“You can count on me, my lord.” Shary bowed her head respectfully. “I’ve already begun gathering information on the capital.”

“Excellent. I’d expect nothing less from you.”

“My primary focus has been checking out all the popular sweet shops!” Shary pumped her fists enthusiastically, eyes glittering.

“...I’d expect nothing less from you,” Leonis repeated, far more deflated this time.

Suddenly, he felt unusually anxious.

Maybe I should consider bringing that Sakura Orchid intelligence unit, Murakumo, over to my side.

“...Leo? Are you talking to someone?”

The door to the locker room opened, and Riselia stepped out, clad in her training outfit.

“No,” the Undead King replied nonchalantly, as though nothing had happened. “Let’s begin our practice.”

Shary had already disappeared into Leonis’s shadow.



Those Sakura Orchid mercenaries... Finzel hired them, didn’t he?

The Astral Garden—a virtual Assault Garden made up of mana data. Elfiné, manifesting within that artificial space as her black-winged angel avatar, glared at the barrier set before her.

If she was so inclined, Elfiné could access military secrets with nothing but an academy terminal, but the Phillet Company’s defensive systems were firmer than the government’s.

The D Project... My research still hasn’t turned up anything concrete.

An experiment to transform Holy Swords into Demon Swords. The military had abandoned the idea, only for the Phillet Company to pick it up. Holy Swordsmen with Demon Swords developed mental instabilities. Liat Guinness, captain of the seventh platoon, was one such example. He'd gone wild and attacked his friends with his Demon Sword.

Worse yet, when his Demon Sword went berserk, Liat took on a form similar to that of a Void. The Holy Swords meant to combat the Voids were being polluted by the power of emptiness.

Why would the Phillet Company pursue such dangerous experiments?

Elfiné had managed to uncover only a few slim pieces of substantial information. She knew that the Sakura Orchid mercenary unit known as the Kenki Gathering was involved in the Demon Sword Project's experiments, and that her older brother, Finzel Phillet, had hired the group.

It felt unlikely that Finzel had done so of his own initiative. An undertaking of this scale undoubtedly involved the head of the Phillet Company. The Seventh Assault Garden's return to the capital was a stroke of luck for Elfiné, in a way.

Things are progressing swifter than expected, but I was stuck in a stalemate anyhow.

Regardless, she had to settle the score with her two older brothers and her father. The noble house of Count Phillet was a huge enterprise, however. Could she really stand up to it all on her own?

I can't trust Clauvia. At least not for now.

And Elfiné couldn't get Riselia and the other girls involved in her personal battle.

What do I do...?

The girl stood before the barrier, lost in anxious thoughts. After a while, a boy's face surfaced in her mind. He looked no older than ten, but Elfiné understood he was immensely powerful and had a great secret.

Would he side with her against this menacing opponent?



“Huuuh?! W-we can enter the Holy Sword Dance Festival?!” Regina exclaimed in shock.

That evening, Riselia had gathered the members of the eighteenth platoon in the meeting room and relayed what President Oberth had said earlier.

“Yes. I told him I’d hold off on giving the answer until I had a chance to discuss it with you all. So how does everyone feel about the idea?” Riselia’s eyes moved between her assembled platoon mates.

Leonis sat next to her, munching on a doughnut.

“I want nothing else,” Sakuya replied immediately. “I want to demonstrate the Sakura Orchid’s sword style to everyone. Plus, the prize money is tempting.”

Riselia nodded, and her attention shifted to Elfiné.

“What about you, Miss Finé?”

“...Well,” Elfiné began, placing a hand on her chin pensively. “I agree that it would be a tremendous honor, but...are you sure about this, Selia?”

“Me...?” Riselia seemed baffled by Elfiné’s concern.

“Yes. The Senate wants to use you as Duke Crystalia’s daughter to raise morale, right? However, we don’t know what will come of that.”

If the eighteenth platoon’s achievements in the Holy Sword Dance Festival weren’t satisfactory, many would hold its members in contempt. But if they did make a good impression, it could draw unwanted attention to Riselia.

The girl in question shook her head. “Thank you, Miss Finé, but I want to participate for the honor of my father and the Crystalia Knights. Besides, since it took me so long to awaken to the power of my Holy Sword, I want nothing more than to inspire hope in those without a means to fight the Voids.”

At Riselia’s resolute statement, Elfiné, Regina, and Sakuya all nodded.

“...All right. If you feel prepared, then I have no problem participating.”

“And I’ll follow you anywhere, Lady Selia. I mean, I *am* your maid,” Regina said with a shrug.

“Thank you, everyone.” Riselia bowed her head. “And since that’s decided, we

start a special training regimen tomorrow!”

“S-special training regimen?” Regina parroted.

“Yes. We don’t have long until the Holy Sword Dance Festival. We need to gather data on the participating units and their members, and put our team training plan together accordingly!”

“The date for this year’s festival is...after the twelfth, I think?” Elfiné checked the schedule on her terminal.

“Practice is fine, but until the mana furnace is exchanged, Excalibur Academy’s primary facilities are off-line, right?” Regina pointed out.

Riselia frowned. “Yes...I suppose that’s true.”

The large combat field capable of simulating different terrains was inoperable, which meant sparring matches between platoons weren’t possible. They could use the outdoor grounds, but Holy Sword usage had to be kept to a minimum, since the weapons were capable of large-scale destruction. Basic exercise was doable, but the grounds weren’t suited to practical combat training.

As for other academy facilities, other platoons were already scrambling for the right to use them. Most of the finest equipment was relegated to the elite, high-ranking platoons participating in the Holy Sword Dance Festival. As special entrants, the eighteenth platoon’s members would have difficulty securing anything for themselves.

In other words, it was unlikely they’d be able to get sufficient training in before the day of the tournament.

“Can’t we practice in the woods behind the dorm?” Sakuya proposed.

“Sorry, Sakuya, but I don’t think any of us can mimic your crazy regimen,” Regina replied.

Sakuya’s methods were too unique for other people to replicate.

And we can’t exactly use my Realm of Shadows as a training ground, Leonis mused.

Quietly, Elfiné offered, “I might be able to get us a place to train.”

“Really, Miss Finé?!” Riselia asked, her eyes wide with surprise.

“But it would only be after we reach the capital. The Phillet Company has a testing ground for weapon development trials. It’s not quite on the same level as Excalibur Academy’s facilities, but it should be spacious enough for us to practice. And we won’t have to worry about getting permission to use our Holy Swords.”

“...C-can we? But, Miss Finé, you...” Riselia trailed off.

Elfiné’s relationship with her family and the Phillet Company wasn’t good.

“It’s fine,” Elfiné assured her, although her expression looked a bit troubled. “I won’t be able to avoid them in Camelot, so I might as well use my position as the company head’s daughter for the good of the team, right?” She smiled impishly and then added, “Oh, and I’ll book us rooms in a Phillet Company hotel near the training grounds.”

“Huh?! We can’t have you do all that for us,” Riselia responded, flustered.

Elfiné shook her head, however, insisting it was all right, and she started tapping on her terminal.

“Hmm... Well, I guess we’ll take you up on that offer, then... Thank you!” Cheeks still a bit flushed, Riselia bobbed her head politely.

Elfiné giggled. “This kind of feels like a field trip. It’s exciting.”

...?

Leonis sensed something strange about her expression. Yet it was so subtle that he couldn’t deduce the meaning behind it.



“So this is where you’ve been hiding, Altiria.”

“Ah, big sister Chatres!”

In one corner of a vast garden, where beautiful flowers bloomed, a girl sat on a small bench. A familiar voice pulled her jade eyes from her book, and her golden hair, the color of a stewartia flower, bounced gently.

She was twelve years old, and her fair features still held the cherubic qualities

of youth. It was clear that she would soon mature and blossom, though.

Three royal houses governed the Integrated Human Empire, and of those three, the emperor had been selected from House O'Itriese. This girl was House O'Itriese's youngest daughter—the fourth princess, Altiria Ray O'Itriese.

"You're back so soon?" Altiria asked.

"Yes, I need to have my Holy Sword tuned for the Holy Sword Dance Festival."

The one speaking to the girl as an equal was her older sister, Chatres Ray O'Itriese—the third princess. If Altiria's loveliness was that of a white lily, then Chatres's matched a rose. Her rich, golden locks reached down to her waist, and she was clad in something resembling a military uniform and armed with a saber. Despite being a royal, this seventeen-year-old girl was a Holy Swordsman who led an anti-Void unit on the front lines.

"Are you feeling better already?" Chatres inquired.

"Yes, I'm all better now," her younger sister replied.

The older sibling grinned. "That's good." Chatres would never show such gentleness to her subordinates.

Since the *Hyperion* seajacking incident at the Seventh Assault Garden, Altiria hadn't been in the best of health. She seemed to be recovering well now, though.

"I'll get to see you perform in the tournament this year, right?" Altiria asked excitedly.

"Yeah, so look forward to it. I only hope there's good competition this time around..." Chatres doubted such an opponent would appear, however.

Known as the Silver-Blooded Sword Princess, Chatres Ray O'Itriese was the strongest Holy Swordswoman.

"Oh, there should be," Altiria replied, smiling suggestively.

"...?" Chatres regarded her sister questioningly.

"The Seventh Assault Garden is sending a special entry unit along with their standard representatives."

“A special entry?” Chatres scowled. “It’s the first I’ve heard of that.” She imagined this was her little sister’s idea of a joke.

To Altiria, however, it was anything but. She knew who’d come to her rescue on the *Hyperion*. She’d seen it aboard the deck of the ship. When that terrible witch tried to take her away, a ten-year-old boy had struck down the gigantic Void.

It wouldn’t be long before the Seventh Assault Garden arrived.

And then, I’ll be able to see him again.

This young girl of twelve felt her heart throb.

CHAPTER 2

THE IMPERIAL CAPITAL, CAMELOT

As the Imperial Government Tower, symbol of the capital, approached in the distance, the people of the Seventh Assault Garden cheered in joy and relief. There had been multiple mana furnace malfunctions that forced temporary pauses during the trip, but thankfully, no Voids had appeared during the voyage.

One hundred and twenty-eight hours had passed since the Seventh Assault Garden left the Dark Continent. At 10:30 Imperial Standard Time, seventeen hours past schedule, the Seventh Assault Garden, Terminus, along with the Sixth Assault Garden, Alexandria, successfully connected with the capital's float bay area and coupled with Camelot.



"Did you pack what you need, Leo? You didn't forget anything?"

They were in the float bay's coupling terminal. Riselia, carrying a swollen travel bag, turned around to look at Leonis with concern.

The boy shrugged. "I'm fine. I didn't have much to pack anyway."

Most of Leonis's belongings were in the Realm of Shadows's treasure vault. There he kept the riches and valuables he'd pillaged from conquered enemy kingdoms and magical artifacts he'd obtained by defeating gods. The vault was filled with many spoils of war, but the repository's manager, Shary, often criticized Leonis for carelessly tossing treasures into the pile.

"The hotel should have most things we'll need, so don't worry about that," Elfiné said with a slightly exasperated smile.

"Yes, I hardly have anything on me," Sakuya remarked.

"You hardly keep any possessions to begin with," Riselia countered.

Voice low, Sakuya confessed, "I had to pawn off most of my room's furniture

because of underground gambling.”

“...Won’t the academy get mad at you for that?” Riselia inquired, concern in her tone.

“Yes, but all I need to buy everything back is one big score.” Sakuya nodded confidently.

She isn’t thinking of using her mystic eye for gambling, is she? Leonis wondered.

“Ah, it’s opening. It’s our turn.” Regina pointed ahead as the terminal’s gate rose.

The boarding procedure went by smoothly, thanks to their Excalibur Academy IDs. Afterward, Leonis and the girls were instructed to board a linear railway car that would take them into the capital’s Central Garden.

Leonis and Riselia took a booth seat by the window.

“Once we’re out of the coupling bridge, we’ll have a view of the city,” Riselia explained.

“Will it really be that different from the Seventh Assault Garden?” Leonis asked.

“Well...” Riselia paused for thought. “Our city’s an offense-oriented Assault Garden, built to destroy Void Hives. The capital was designed as a fortress to defend humanity, so it has fewer combat facilities...”

Camelot, also known as the First Assault Garden, was roughly fourteen times the size of the Seventh Assault Garden. On top of that, it was under constant expansion, with more residential floats being constructed. This meant it was slower than the Seventh Assault Garden. Most of the time, it was docked on the continent’s shoreline, usually somewhere in this sector of the ocean.

“The Second Assault Garden is charged with defending the capital,” Elfiné, seated opposite Leonis and Riselia, said. “The two cities always work together. If the Seventh Assault Garden is a sword, then the Second Assault Garden is like a shield.”

At present, there were seven Assault Gardens, collectively forming the most

effective anti-Void strike force in the world. A total of twelve were planned, but following the Third Assault Garden's destruction six years ago, focus had shifted to its restoration, a process that would take over a decade.

The linear rail exited the tunnel at last, and sunlight streamed in through the window. At last, the capital's cityscape could be seen.

...So this is Camelot.

Rows of towering, laminated buildings. Massive pipes that ran between every structure. Leonis had had Shary scout out the city ahead of him, but there were many things he couldn't have known about until he witnessed them for himself.

The capital—humankind's greatest fortress and the first of the Assault Gardens. Leonis felt a kind of foreboding about this city. Something was waiting for him here.



The Central Garden was Camelot's main government sector. As the core of the Assault Garden, it housed the Grand Cathedral, the hub for the city's administration. It was also home to Palace Illuminous.

Leonis's group disembarked the linear rail's terminal, boarded a large vehicle Elfiné had ordered for ahead of time, and set off for the hotel they'd be staying in.

"...There's a lot of people around. Is there a festival of some sort today?" Leonis asked as he watched the scenery fly by.

The Seventh Assault Garden's Central Garden had its commercial district, which was also very crowded, but not to this extent.

From her spot sitting across from him, Elfiné responded, "No, this is just typical pedestrian traffic here. The population density is greater than in the Seventh Assault Garden. Our home was made to launch offensives against the Voids, after all."

"Just be careful so you don't get lost, Leo," Riselia cautioned with a little grin.

"I'm not a child," Leonis retorted, exasperated.

"I'm no good with crowds," Sakuya whispered, holding down her eye patch.

“Looking at people too much makes me queasy...”

“W-we’ll have a little more room in a bit...,” Elfiné said with a slightly crooked smile as she rubbed Sakuya’s back.

After about ten minutes, the vehicle had made its way from the Central Garden to the float with the hotel.

“Hmm... Which way to the hotel?” Leonis wondered aloud.

The group stood before a large garden full of gorgeous blossoms.

“We’re here,” Elfiné stated. “All of this *is* the hotel.”

“Huh?”

“This entire float forms the premises of the Shangri-la Resort.”

“...” Leonis swallowed nervously, gazing up at the towers rising from the lush field. “Y-you own all of this, Miss Elfiné...?”

Elfiné frowned. “No, not me. The company does.”

“This is my first time at the Shangri-la Resort,” Riselia said, clearly amazed.

Nodding vacantly, Regina added, “Mine, too.”

“...”

All the girls looked stunned.

Just what is this...?!

Leonis had been taken aback by Sakuya’s estate in Old Town. Riselia’s old home in the Third Assault Garden had been even larger than that. During his time as a hero, Leonis had been invited to the Rognas Kingdom’s luxurious palace, which dwarfed both. And yet...

That’s absurd. This whole float is private property?!

...this great structure put all of them to shame. It rivaled Leonis’s castle in Necrozoa, Death Palace, in size. Of course, Death Palace likely won in terms of total space, since it had a vast underground dungeon. Yet the mere fact a comfort lodging facility rivaled one of the Dark Lords’ Armies’ greatest bastions was absurd.

“There are all sorts of training facilities on the premises,” Elfiné explained. “We should be free to use them as we please.”

“R-really?!” Riselia’s eyes widened in disbelief.

Elfiné nodded. “Yes, no need to feel shy. Use them whenever you please.”

“Hmm, I’m sorry if this is sudden, Miss Elfiné, but may I ask something?” Leonis pointed at a large marble sculpture standing in the center of the garden. “Can that statue move, by any chance?”

“Huh?” Elfiné blinked a few times. “I don’t think it does, no.”

“Really?” Leonis sighed in relief.

The gates of Death Palace were guarded by large bone statues that would attack whenever they sensed the presence of the living nearby.

My castle wins on that front, Leonis thought, feeling oddly competitive.



They walked past the garden and into a tall building standing in the center of the float. It rivaled the Seventh Assault Garden’s Central Tactical Tower in size.

“Ahhhh! Kid! Kid, listen!” Regina said, excitedly tapping on Leonis’s shoulder. “The Phillet Company’s Shangri-La Resort is a five-star hotel used by famous royalty and nobility!”

“M-Miss Regina, stop that, it hurts,” Leonis protested.

Still, he couldn’t fault her enthusiasm. The hotel’s magnificent interior felt like a king’s palace. Elfiné simply walked right in, without going through the counter for check-in. The hotel’s employees didn’t look bothered by her actions, though, bowing their heads to her reverently.

“...Miss Elfiné really is the daughter of a rich family...,” Leonis whispered to Riselia, who walked next to him.

“That’s right, Miss Finé is an heiress to Count Phillet’s noble house.”

Leonis nearly remarked that it was impressive Elfiné put up with their dorm because of how similar it was to a haunted mansion. He stopped himself at the last second, however. Riselia was a renowned duke’s daughter, after all.

The group boarded an elevator and rode to the thirteenth floor.

“Here we are,” Elfiné stated as she stepped out into the hall. “Use anyplace you’d like.”

“Anyplace we’d... Which rooms are ours?” Regina asked.

“I rented out the whole floor,” Elfiné explained with a self-deprecating smile. “Take any rooms you prefer.”

“Th-the whole floor?!”

“Yes. It’s all for the eighteenth platoon,” Elfiné replied coolly.

“Whaaaaaaat?!” The three other girls exchanged looks of surprise.

“Let’s make the biggest space our meeting room,” Elfiné decided.

Thus, the eighteenth platoon scouted out the largest chamber on the floor so they could use it to discuss their plans.

“...W-wow...” Regina marveled as she stepped inside.

At the center of the room, which was spacious enough to serve as a dance hall, were a round wooden table and sofas. The furnishings all looked high-class, and expensive-looking portraits hung on the wall.

Is this what counts for avant-garde art nowadays? Leonis pondered. The paintings all looked like childish scribbles to him, but they were probably crafted by famous artists.

“Fluffymaru! There’s a Fluffymaru here!” Sakuya exclaimed, immediately sinking into the sofa and hugging a soft cushion.

Evidently, everything fluffy counted as Fluffymaru to her.

“Let’s open the curtains.” Riselia approached the window and opened its velvet curtains. The balcony offered a view of the entire float.

“Ah, Lady Selia, there are pools!” Regina exclaimed, her twintails bouncing.

There were five large pools directly beneath the hotel. Incidentally, Death Palace had no water for swimming whatsoever, only poisonous swamps that spewed deadly miasma.

“What’s that giant device over there?” Leonis asked, pointing at something near the water.

“That’s a water slide,” Riselia told him. “You go down through the inside of that tube into the water.”

I thought it was some kind of weapon. Having learned that it was play equipment, Leonis lost all interest in the thing. *Well, I’m sure Blackas would appreciate it.*

Unlike Leonis, who was a poor swimmer, Blackas enjoyed the exercise. And if he were to do it in the middle of the night, he could avoid detection.

“The Shangri-la Resort is a leisure island that makes use of the entire float,” Regina said, reading from a guidebook. “It has pools, theaters, sport facilities, a concert hall, a stadium, a live performance venue, a casino, an aquarium, and an amusement park.”

“A casino...” Sakuya abruptly sat up, still hugging the pillow.

“Stop it, you two,” Riselia chided, her brow furrowed. “We didn’t come here to play around.”

“I rented out the sports facilities for us, so we can use them to train all we want,” Elfiné remarked.

“Thank you so much for all of this, Miss Finé.” Riselia retrieved a notepad from her pocket. “I already have our regimen planned out. We won’t have any time to goof off.”

Regina peered at Riselia’s schedule and frowned. “...Whoa, it’s jam-packed.”

Riselia spread out her notes, which were as meticulous as one might expect of her. Her plan included the training regimen, when the platoon would wake and go to bed, and when they’d take breaks and eat. A lot of the practice time had Riselia and Leonis training together.

I won’t have much time to investigate the capital myself like this. Leonis would have to entrust that to Shary, and only go out himself after dark.

“Let’s decide the room assignments,” Riselia suggested. “I want to be in the same room as Leo.”

“Ah, that’s not fair, Lady Selia! Stop hogging the kid all to yourself!” Regina protested, wrapping an arm around Leonis’s and hugging him tightly.

“M-Miss Regina?!” Leonis squeaked.

“I’m not hogging him; I’m his guardian,” Riselia said stubbornly.

“Boo! I want to toy with the kid, too!”

Don’t you mean “play with”?

“Hmm. I prefer being in the same room as Miss Selia,” Leonis stated.

Riselia beamed. “Leo!”

As far as Leonis was concerned, sleeping separately from Riselia was inefficient. Her vampiric impulse sometimes kicked in during the night, and she would unconsciously slip out of bed to suck Leonis’s blood.

...What if someone else saw that?

“Aww. Fine, I’ll just come to Lady Selia’s room to toy with you.” Regina pouted, but otherwise stepped down.

Following this, Regina, Sakuya, and Elfiné all picked their rooms and registered them in their terminals.

“Okay, now that we’ve got that settled, let’s drop off our luggage.” Riselia reached for her bag.

Elfiné stopped her, though, standing abruptly. “Selia, wait a moment.”

“Miss Finé?”

Elfiné looked around the room with a serious expression. “Activate.” Two Eye of the Witch orbs manifested overhead, and they began inspecting the room. The spheres lit up, with rows of numbers running across them.

“What’s wrong, Miss Finé?” Regina asked.

“I’m scanning for wiretaps...,” Elfiné replied gravely. “Looks like this place is clean.” She shrugged, and then the Eye of the Witch orbs vanished into thin air. Elfiné looked at her fellow members of the eighteenth platoon and steeled herself. “There’s something I need to tell you all.”



“The D Project?”

Everyone seated at the table exchanged curious glances. Elfiné had just confessed to them that the Phillet Company was behind the Demon Sword-related incidents.

“My family was involved with Liat going berserk during the Hive annihilation mission, and it was probably behind the Voids appearing during the Sakura Orchid festival recently. I’m sure of it.”

“...It can’t be...” Riselia breathed out, looking stunned. “I mean, the Phillet Company develops anti-Void weapons for the Integrated Human Empire. It’s a national enterprise.”

“Yes. And that’s why it’s safe to assume they have cooperators within the military. Or maybe the army is backing the project,” Elfiné replied, her voice hushed. “If the information my sister gave me is to be trusted, all the academy students who were corrupted by Demon Swords came into contact with one of the Phillet Company’s Artificial Elementals.”

“Are you saying an Artificial Elemental is turning people’s Holy Swords into Demon Swords?” Regina questioned.

Elfiné exhaled. “...I don’t know exactly, but I have enough evidence to suggest a connection.”

“...” Sakuya had been silent for a while, evidently considering something.

“...I want to discover the truth about the Demon Sword Project while I’m here in the capital,” Elfiné stated, clenching her fist.

“Why...?” Riselia whispered. “Why didn’t you tell us this sooner?”

“Lady Selia...” Regina looked at her, concerned.

Riselia bit her lip. A wise girl like her surely knew the reason. As the upperclassman, Elfiné didn’t want her friends from the eighteenth platoon involved in such a dangerous conspiracy. It had doubtlessly weighed on her for a long time.

However, this only made Riselia all the more frustrated. Why hadn’t she noticed Elfiné carrying this burden alone?

“...I’m sorry, Selia.” Elfiné gently placed a hand on the other girl’s shoulder.

Riselia shook her head gently. “No. It’s my fault for not recognizing the trouble you were dealing with. But please, you need to count on us more.”

“All right, I will.” Elfiné nodded. “I won’t hesitate to ask you again.”

“I’ll help you, too, Miss Finé,” Regina said.

“And I’ll lend you my aid as well. Limited though my powers may be,” Leonis added.

Getting such important information on these Demon Swords was a windfall. Nefakess, Zemein, and their ilk were definitely connected to it all.

“Miss Finé.” Sakuya finally spoke up. “The people you’re talking about—they’re the ones who gave the Kenki Gathering their Demon Swords, correct?”

“Yes. My brother, Finzel Phillet, hired the Sakura Orchid’s Kenki Gathering as guards. There’s no outright proof, but it’s clear he was involved.”

“I see...,” Sakuya responded, her voice thick with cold bloodlust. “Then I can’t stay out of this.”

“...Thank you.” Elfiné bowed before the younger girl.

“Does the academy know?” Riselia inquired.

“You guys are the only ones I can trust. The Phillet family has connections with the army, so making this public would be dangerous.”

“Was there a reason you picked a hotel that belongs to the Phillet Company, then?” Regina asked.

“Yes. My brother’s probably wary that I’m back at the capital,” Elfiné replied. “He’ll be following my every move. So I figured that if I intentionally go in under his nose, it’ll make it harder for him to interfere. Plus, since the Shangri-la Resort is used by nobility and royalty, he’ll think twice before doing anything reckless here.”

“I see,” Regina said.

And she’d rented out the whole floor to ensure the group wasn’t overheard or in any bugged rooms.

She really is cunning, Leonis thought.

“There’s a Phillet Company research facility built here,” Elfiné continued. “The botanical garden and aquarium are for research purposes. And they develop Artificial Elementals, too...”

“So you think we might learn something about this plan,” Riselia concluded.

“I’ll be keeping up my investigation,” Elfiné told the others. “But for the time being, watch out for the Phillet Company.”



A white-haired priest stood at the back of a cathedral. He bowed his head respectfully with a faint smile. “Thank you for coming all the way here, Lord Phillet.”

This young priest was Nefakess Reizaad, cardinal of the Human Church.

“I’m honored to be here, and to meet the second-highest-ranking apostle of the goddess,” the other man replied.

“Given your accomplishments, it was only a matter of time until we met. The D Project’s success would not have been possible without your endeavors,” said Nefakess.

The tall young man opposite Nefakess responded, “I’m honored by your praise.” His hair was black and sleek, and he’d grown it out. This was Finzel Phillet—House Phillet’s second son and a successor to the family’s enterprise.

It’s ironic, Finzel mused. *An apostle consumed by the emptiness serving as a clergyman for the Human Church.*

The apostles formed a secret society that served the Goddess of Nothingness. Six years ago, they made contact with the Phillet family, whose members led the Void Gospel faction, shortly after news of the Third Assault Garden’s destruction shook the capital.

From the apostles, Finzel acquired knowledge that surpassed everything humanity was capable of. Finzel was the least talented of his siblings and possessed no Holy Sword. It was only with the apostles’ help that he had climbed to his current position in the Phillet Company.

In exchange for their wisdom, he supported their plan to invert the power of Holy Swords and produce Demon Swords in their place—the D Project.

“We need to advance our undertaking, so I’ve come to check on your progress,” Nefakess said.

“The D Project is progressing according to schedule,” Finzel replied. “The experiment in the Seventh Assault Garden was a success.”

The Sakura Orchid mercenaries Finzel had hired proved to be quite the worthwhile disposable pawns. Seraphim, the Artificial Elemental imbued with the Goddess Factor, was nearly complete.

“Yes, I’ve confirmed the Demon Swords’ transformation into Voids. The results are quite wonderful.” Nefakess clapped his hands with a smile. “However, you’ve yet to bring it to the next phase.”

“Yes—they still need to be tested in live combat,” Finzel replied. “We’ll have the results for that in the coming days.”

“The Holy Sword Dance Festival,” Nefakess remarked. “A human celebration of the Holy Swords’ power.”

“The most elite Holy Swordsmen will be gathering there. I can think of no better stage.”

“Indeed.”

Finzel’s voice turned suddenly uneasy. “Lord Nefakess... You will uphold your end of the bargain, right? Once the project succeeds, will I be given an audience?”

“Of course,” the apostle assured him with a serene grin. “Your meeting with the goddess will be approved.”

“Oh, finally...”

Their goddess was a deity born of the nothingness, which harbored infinite wisdom. She was the being that granted humanity its Holy Swords.

Soon... Soon I will surpass my brother. I will even overtake Father! Joy burned in Finzel’s chest.

“But do be careful...,” Nefakess added, his smile melting.

“Careful of what?”

“Of the Seventh Assault Garden. There’s something troublesome in that city.”

“Troublesome?” Finzel frowned. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. It’s a singularity of some sort. That presence could potentially throw the prophecy off-kilter...”

“Hmph,” Finzel huffed. “The Seventh Assault Garden, you say?” The image of his younger sister, who’d fled the family a few years ago, flashed in his mind.

Elfiné Phillet—the fool who’d discarded her position, despite being graced with a powerful Holy Sword.

It can’t be her. Finzel dismissed that foolish notion with a shake of his head.

“Understood. You can rest assured, wise apostle. All will go as planned.”

CHAPTER 3

TRAINING CAMP

Sunlight filtered in through the curtains.

“Nnn... Mmm...”

Leonis, clad in his pajamas, sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes groggily. It was a top-class mattress, and his body sank right into its comfortable embrace. To one accustomed to sleeping in a stone coffin, lying in a bed like this was something he couldn't quite get used to.

I feel like my bed in the dorm might have been better than this.

Leonis drew the curtains on the bed-side window. He looked over to the side and saw the mattress beside his was already empty. The sound of running water came from the bathroom. Riselia must have awoken ahead of him because she was already in the shower.

I should take this chance to check Shary's report.

He lay down on the bed and activated his terminal. After tapping on it a few times, Leonis called up Shary's report on the Demon Wolf Pack, the group he controlled under the guise of Zol Vadis.

First was the underground dungeon. Construction of the Demon Lord's Castle was well underway. Monsters were naturally appearing in the lower levels, and Leonis's minions were using them for training. Lena Darkleaf was also preparing to negotiate with the capital's underground organizations, as scheduled.

Hmm. Everything seems to be going swimmingly.

Leonis sent a reply that he acknowledged the progress update. The next report was on the capital's recommended restaurants and was markedly lengthier than the previous one. Leonis made a mental note to check out the eateries.

Oh, a place with a real pizza oven... I see.

“Whatcha lookin’ at, kid? ♪” Leonis felt a pair of arms suddenly snake around him and embrace him from behind.

The Undead King jerked. “M-Miss Regina?!” He turned around, only to be met with Regina in a bathrobe and undergarments.

A little too casual, don’t you think?!

Her blond twintails were still wet, so she’d probably come right from the shower. Faint steam rose from her gently flushed skin, and Leonis caught the scent of floral shampoo.

“...Wait, what are you doing in our room?!” Leonis demanded.

“Lady Selia asked me to come over and give you a wake-up call,” Regina explained with a shrug.

“But why are you in your underwear?!”

“I figured getting dressed for this would just be a waste of time, so I came as is.”

“You walked around in a bathrobe?!”

The eighteenth platoon had free rein of the entire floor, so there wasn’t anyone else to see, but still...

“Plus, I figured it’d be a good way to bully you, kid.” The maid stuck out her tongue mischievously.

I knew it! Leonis scolded himself for his carelessness. He’d completely let his guard down around her.



“You were really absorbed in whatever you’re looking at. Is this something pervy?” Regina said with an impish smile, trying to peek at Leonis’s terminal. Her breasts squished against his back.

“N-no!”

“I mean, you’re a growing boy, so it makes sense.”

“No, this is nothing like that!” Leonis argued, pressing the terminal against his stomach.

Regina seeing Shary’s report would be trouble.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep it a secret from Lady Selia.”

“I was just researching the teams participating in the Holy Sword Dance Festival!” Leonis fibbed.

“But Lady Selia is already doing an analysis on their Holy Swords,” Regina countered.

“Well, I wanted to know the ace of each squad!”

“Their aces...”

“Yes!” Leonis pressed the excuse. “Strategies are built around the team’s star member. We in the eighteenth platoon build our plans around Sakuya, our main attacker, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So if we know who our opponents’ best combatants are, we’ll have a better idea of what strategy each team might take.”

“Oh, you’re right.” Regina nodded, her face earnest. “Well, when it comes to skilled Holy Swordsmen, Lady Chatres comes to mind.”

“Chatres?”

“Chatres Ray O’ltrie. The third princess.”

The third princess...

“Doesn’t that make her—?” Leonis started asking.

“Yes,” Regina cut in at a whisper. “She’s my older sister.”

Regina was the disinherited fourth princess of House O'ltriese. This meant that Chatres was her elder sister, although the two were very close in age.

“Princess Chatres participated as a representative of the capital’s Elysion Academy when she was fourteen years old and has participated in the Holy Sword Dance Festival in years since. During her debut, Excalibur Academy took the win, but she dominated the two years after. Her Holy Sword, the Doom Blade, is a melee-combat Holy Sword that can defeat large Voids.”

“You know a great deal about her.”

“...No, this is common knowledge. Really,” Regina said, averting her gaze from Leonis. Evidently, she was very conscious of her sister’s achievements. “Not that I think special entrants like us will face her,” the girl added hastily.

But then...

“Regina, what are you doing?!” Riselia opened the door to the bathroom and stepped out.

“Lady Selia, the kid’s been watching perv—”

“I was not!”



After a light breakfast in the largest room on the floor, the members of the eighteenth platoon made their way to the training facility. The Phillet Company testing ground used for weapons development was only a fifteen-minute walk from the hotel.

“Miss Elfiné?” Leonis called during the stroll.

“Yes, Leo?”

“You’re rebelling against your family, right? Won’t that jeopardize your position?” Leonis had been pondering that point since yesterday. If the truth of the D Project were to be exposed, House Phillet would be ruined.

“...Yes, it will,” she confirmed, smiling. “But I’m prepared to accept that.”

“I...see.”

“Count Deinfraude Phillet is a cold, ruthless man,” Elfiné said quietly. “He

pitted my siblings and me against each other...to determine who would succeed him. When I ran away to Excalibur Academy, he branded me a failure. My mother was killed, too.”

“...Killed?” Leonis repeated, but Elfiné didn’t reply.

“Still, I keep the Phillet name because its power is useful. Once I’ve brought my family’s secrets to light, I’ll have no more use for it.” With a resolute gaze, Elfiné stared into the sky.



“This is great! We’ll be able to train all we want here!” Riselia declared with satisfaction as she and her friends stood before the gate into the testing grounds.

The Phillet weapon testing zone was much larger than Leonis had anticipated, based on its appearance from a distance. All around the main white dome were pipes that linked it to the mana furnace, and there were large containers attached to it, too.

“Oh, they have Void Simulators. Can we break them?” Regina asked, pointing at a spiderlike metallic device.

Excalibur Academy used those machines as well. On his first day, Leonis broke one of them, and Instructor Diglassê later told him they were very expensive to replace.

“Hmm.” Elfiné cracked a slightly exasperated smile. “Try not to ruin the place’s equipment, if you can help it.”

“F-figures...,” Regina replied, as Sakuya frowned in disappointment next to her.

Void Simulators aside, the place was quite well outfitted. It made for a fine spot to practice.

We can drill Riselia’s sorcery here, too...

Leonis typically had the Three Champions of Rognas assist Riselia with that, but Leonis had left them to guard the Seventh Assault Garden for the duration of the trip to the capital. To that end, Leonis would have to personally guide her while they were here. It was an excellent opportunity to observe his minion’s

growth.

Everyone passed their check at the gate and entered the facility.

“...Wow!” Riselia exclaimed in surprise.

There were walls elevated to different heights towering over them, creating what felt like an artificial forest.

“I had them prepare an urban combat field, like the ones they use in the Holy Sword Dance Festival,” Elfiné stated.

“I see.” Leonis nodded. “Very pragmatic of you.”

“Can we bust through those walls?” Regina asked.

Riselia shook her head. “Not this time.”

The platoon quickly split into two teams and held a mock battle. The objective was simple: wipe out the opposing squad or capture the flag. The defending side included Sakuya and Elfiné, along with three spiderlike Void Simulators. On the offensive, Riselia and Leonis formed the vanguard, while Regina supported from behind.

“Miss Finé and Sakuya are gonna be a tough team to beat,” Riselia admitted.

“...Yes, I can imagine so,” Leonis replied.

Given this terrain, one possible strategy was to have Elfiné track movements from above, while Sakuya launched surprise attacks using that intel. By contrast, the other side had Riselia and Leonis on the front lines, with Regina offering covering fire from a platform in the back.

...We'll just have to go for a frontal assault.

“Let's begin, then!” Riselia gave the signal, and the training match began.



A large vehicle drove down the Central Garden's main street. Externally, it was no different from most other vehicles, but on the inside, it was completely different. Its windowpanes were tinted with magitech, making it so no one could peer in from the outside, and its fuselage was armored as military-grade ones were.

This was the royal family's exclusive vehicle, and sitting in its back seat was a twelve-year-old princess. Cradled in her arms was a small creature, reminiscent of a rabbit, with a red gem embedded into its forehead. This was the spirit Carbuncle. Not an Artificial Elemental, but a genuine Origin Spirit. Of the three royal houses, only House O'Itriese commanded the power of Origin Spirits.

"I'm so happy, Chatres. It's not often I get to go on an outing with you," Altiria said.

"It's just a training exercise," the third princess replied, seated opposite her younger sibling. "Don't expect it to be interesting,"

Chatres's expression looked cold, but she wasn't particularly in a bad mood. In fact, most of her subordinates would interpret her demeanor as being fairly positive. Their vehicle was currently headed for a Phillet Company-owned weapon-testing ground. Previously, Chatres had used a facility that belonged to the capital's Elysion Academy, but since both students and reporters had flocked over to see the beautiful, powerful Lady Chatres in action, she had to change places this year. She didn't want to trouble the school or other participating squads.

I swear. Holy Swords aren't some performance spectacle.

Still, the selection of competitors was supposed to be more promising this year. Duke Crystalia's daughter from Excalibur Academy was one entrant getting a lot of attention, but apparently, she'd only awoken to the power of her Holy Sword a few months ago.

This stage isn't forgiving enough to allow someone without the necessary mettle to compete. Chatres sighed. She didn't feel one way or the other about Riselia Crystalia herself, but knowing that the nobles were trying to capitalize on her being a hero's daughter was annoying.

"I hope I can manifest my Holy Sword soon. That way I can be in your unit, Chatres...," Altiria whispered, stroking Carbuncle's forehead.

"Who's to say your Holy Sword will be suited for battle like mine is?"

"...Right. That's up to the planet to decide, I suppose."

Ever since the incident aboard the *Hyperion*, Altiria's expressions had

matured. Chatres's younger sister had always been a sagacious girl, but perhaps she'd come to understand the importance of being a princess.

If I could have it my way, you'd never have to stand on the battlefield.



“—Let's go, Leo!”

“Okay!”

Leonis took off after Riselia, who bolted forward. An artificial wall stood in their way, obscuring their line of sight. Per the rules, they couldn't destroy the barricades, which made things troublesome. Instead, Regina and Leonis had to rely on Regina, who was atop a platform at their backs, to scout things out for them.

Obviously, if Leonis used a mystic eye of clairvoyance, he could expand his perception. However...

Working within the rules is entertaining in its own way.

...during training matches, Leonis forbade himself from using all spells that were above the second order. After fighting unrestricted against foes like the Dark Lords and the Six Heroes, he found that regulated matches like this one were surprisingly fun.

“Miss Selia, look up!” Leonis stopped in his tracks.

A massive shadow descended on them. A metallic weapon shaped like a spider—a Void Simulator!

“Hyahhhhhh!”

Riselia's Bloody Sword flashed, sweeping over the robotic opponent.

Slaaaaaaaaaaash!

In the space of a second, she accurately destroyed fourteen damage sensors across its body. The Void Simulator crumbled to the ground, inoperable.

“Excellent work!”

While praising his minion, Leonis fired a lightning spell that incapacitated another Void Simulator closing in from the other side. Its metallic armor

contorted, and it collapsed on the floor, its many legs crushed.

I didn't expect such a weak spell to destroy them, Leonis thought, breaking into a cold sweat.

But then, glowing spheres burst out of the smoking machine's abdomen.

"...?!"

It was Elfiné's Holy Sword, Eye of the Witch! Three orbs dispersed in different directions, energy building up in them. Leonis reflexively took cover behind the wall. Lasers fired from the spheres, striking the walls and producing a shower of sparks.

She's using her Holy Sword to control the spiders from afar?

The orbs gained altitude, flying up over Leonis's head.

"Leo...!" Riselia called out and swung down her Holy Sword.

Razor-sharp blood arced through the air, cleaving one of the orbs in half. However, the other two split up, taking aim at Riselia. And then...

Vwooosh!

...a blinding flash shot through the two orbs at once, dispersing them into particles of light, which vanished into thin air.

"Lady Selia, I'll cover for you!" Leonis heard a voice call out from the transmitter terminal on his ear.

It was Regina from her sniper position. She was lying prone on the ground, positioned to fire with her Drag Striker.

"She shot them down from such a distance... Impressive," Leonis remarked.

"Regina's one of the academy's top sharpshooters," Riselia said, then she perked up and thrust the tip of her blade over Leonis's shoulder. Particles of light flew into the air. Another orb had been lying in wait on the other side of the wall.

"Watch out, there's still a few nearby!" Regina warned them. And the moment she did, another sphere descended, and...

Flash!

...everything went white.

“She blinded us?!”

It was one of the functions of the Eye of the Witch’s lasers. It probably wasn’t of use against Voids, but when it came to fighting other people, it was perfect for surprise attacks.

“Virga!” Leonis chanted a first-order lightning spell, blasting the latest orb. No sooner had he done so than two more took its place, aiming attacks at him. “Whoa.” Leonis took cover behind the wall.

The place where he’d been standing was scorched black, and a ribbon of smoke rose from it.

“Not bad, Leo. Did you read into my strategy?” Elfiné’s voice called from the orbs whizzing through the air.

“Don’t you think you set the output on those things a little too high, Miss Elfiné?!” Leonis replied, incredulous.

“I figured you’d dodge them easily enough. ♪” Leonis felt the smirk in the girl’s voice.

Is she using this mock battle as an excuse to measure my true powers?

Elfiné had hinted that she knew Leonis concealed his power. He’d wound up carelessly showing her his true strength a few times, after all.

“I think you’re overestimating me, Miss Elfiné,” Leonis replied.

“Leo, let’s break through before we get surrounded,” Riselia told him.

“Understood! Come forth, dark of night—Fougas!”

Forming a smoke screen around himself using sorcery, Leonis took off.

“I can’t let you do that, kid.”

A blade swept through the air. It was accompanied by tendrils of electricity that cleared away the dark mist.

“...?!”

The fabric of white Sakura Orchid attire fluttered in the breeze. A figure

leaped over the wall and landed before them—a girl wielding the Holy Sword Raikirimaru.

“Miss Sakuya...” Leonis stopped in his tracks, holding up the Staff of Sealed Sins.

He was in a relatively open part of the field, but there were walls on all sides, offering him no avenues of escape.

It seems they’ve lured me in.

With the walls all around Leonis, Regina couldn’t provide covering fire. Elfiné’s orbs had lured him here unaware. If Leonis was to get the enemy team’s flag, he needed to defeat Sakuya.

“Leo, step back,” Riselia said, stepping in front of him. “You handle Miss Finé’s orbs.” She faced Sakuya, the Bloody Sword in hand, with earnest eyes. “We’re forcing our way through, Sakuya.”

“A one-on-one?” Sakuya asked. “I’m sorry, Miss Riselia, but you’re still no match for me when it comes to the sword.”

“...Yes. Probably not.”

Sakuya’s words were fact. Riselia’s growth was remarkable, but no other student at Excalibur Academy could match Sakuya when it came to swordplay. Riselia knew this perfectly well.

“However, anything can happen in a match!” Riselia brought the Bloody Sword to her wrist, nicking it and allowing the crimson liquid to drip to the ground. “Hahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” Riselia concentrated mana in her legs, propelling herself forward and closing the distance to Sakuya in a single bound.

Her center of gravity was tilted slightly to the left, for if Riselia had any chance of winning...it was by taking advantage of Sakuya’s covered left eye. One usable eye meant a narrowed field of vision and poor depth perception, making it so Sakuya couldn’t properly gauge distance.

“Dance, my blades—Bloody Spiral!”

Heeding the Vampire Queen’s voice, the blood that had splashed on the ground became a flurry of razors that gathered at the tip of her Holy Sword.

Even Sakuya couldn't dodge so many attacks.

However, an electrical glow ran through Raikirimaru's blade.

"Mikagami Style Swordsmanship—Thunderclap!"

Whoosh!

By the time the sound rang out, the match had already been decided. The two swordswomen flew past each other, and then...

Crrrrack!

...with the clear sound of breaking glass, Riselia's Holy Sword shattered.

"...!"

Riselia lurched forward, her broken Holy Sword still in her grip.

Her attack didn't connect.

Sakuya hadn't held back, however. Forcing a first-rate sword master to resort to a serious technique was an achievement on its own. That was poor comfort for Riselia, though.

"I forfeit." Leonis raised both hands, surrounded by Elfiné's orbs.

Beating the two of them would have been easy for Leonis, but that would render this training meaningless. Elfiné's tactic won them the battle the moment it forced Riselia into a one-on-one match with Sakuya.

"I forfeit, too!" Leonis could see Regina wave a white flag from her platform.

Riselia got to her feet and summoned her Holy Sword again.

"O-one more time!"

Holy Swords were the manifestation of souls. Once shattered, they needed time to mend, yet Riselia's heart hadn't broken yet.

This minion of mine really is unyielding.

"Then I'll change the field and we'll start over," Elfiné said through her orbs.

"Yes, please!"

But then...

“...Huh? Wait, hold on, something ran into our field...”

“Huh?”

“...There’s something running on the walls... A rabbit?”



“...A rabbit?” Leonis looked around. Indeed, he did spy something resembling a bunny hopping atop the walls. But could rabbits really jump that high? It looked less like it was hopping and more like it was floating. With each leap, particles of light blew into the air.

A spirit? Leonis furrowed his brow.

It was definitely a spirit, and a familiar one at that. Its white fur gave off a faint glow, and it had a red gemstone imbedded in its forehead.

That’s...

“That’s Fluffymaru the Bean Cake!” Sakuya exclaimed, pointing at the spirit.

“You know it, Sakuya?” Riselia asked.

“No. But it’s fluffy and soft, so it must be Fluffymaru the Bean Cake,” Sakuya replied, crossing her arms in an extremely confident manner.

“I believe it’s the fourth princess’s spirit...,” Leonis muttered, flatly ignoring Sakuya.

Carbuncle was its name, if I remember correctly...

It was the Origin Spirit the princess aboard the *Hyperion* had had with her.

“Ah, I think you’re right. But what is a royal family’s spirit doing here...?” Riselia said.

Some new voices cut in, as though to answer.

“W-wait, Carbuncle! Where did you go?!”

“Your Highness, it’s dangerous! There are people training inside—”

People where shouting outside the facility.

“Well, I don’t know what it’s doing here, but we should probably catch it,” Elfiné stated.

“I’ll handle it—”

Sakuya jumped up, landing on the wall. With her quick feet, she caught up to the small creature in no time.

“I’ve got you now, Fluffymaru the Bean Cake.” Yet as she tried to wrap both arms around the creature, it passed through her hands. “Huh?”

“Miss Sakuya, spirits don’t have a physical form!” Leonis reminded her.

“Good luck, Sakuya!”

Sakuya was astonished. “Aaargh, what am I supposed to do?!”

With its pursuer dumbfounded, Carbuncle bolted away over the walls, leaving a glowing trail in its wake. It was headed straight for...

“I’ll catch it!” Regina called, spreading both arms wide from atop her sniping point.

Right, Regina can command spirits, Leonis recalled.

“We can let Regina handle this,” Riselia said.

However...

“These walls are in the way.”

“Er, Chatres, what are you planning?!”

“Step back a little, Altiria. Activate!”

They heard a girl’s dignified voice outside the field, and then...

Vwoooooooooosh!

...a crimson beam of light flashed, and with a rumbling sound, the walls set up on the training field all shattered in a spectacular manner.

What?!

Leonis reflexively deployed a protective barrier, shielding Riselia from the blast. A cloud of white dust hung in the air. The particles that had maintained the walls’ shape via mana crumbled to sand.

“*Hack, horf...* What?!” Riselia grabbed Leonis by the arm as she coughed.

An alert blared, and the facility's air conditioner switched on to handle the emergency. It blew away the dust, revealing a uniformed girl brandishing a broadsword. Her hair shone blond, and her noble eyes were the color of jade.

"...Princess...Chatres?" Riselia muttered.

"Huh?" Leonis turned to look at Riselia.

Chatres. Regina had told him of her this morning.

"Oh, Chatres, that's barbaric! There are people training here!" Another figure appeared from behind the uniformed girl.

"This was the fastest way. Besides, I held back."

The second girl wore demure attire and looked closer in age to Leonis.

"...Princess Altiria?!" Riselia exclaimed.

"Huh?" The girl, Altiria Ray O'Itriese, regarded the eighteenth platoon with round eyes "Ah... Whaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!"



Once things had calmed down a bit, Riselia asked, "Princess Altiria, what are you doing here?"

"W-well, you see, my sister, Chatres, was training for the Holy Sword Dance Festival with her unit at the facility next door, and I came along to watch. But then, Carbuncle ran off..."

Leonis did recall hearing about someone using the adjacent facility. *But I didn't think it'd be the ace Holy Swordswoman I heard about this morning.*

Chatres Ray O'Itriese—the empire's third princess and the Holy Sword Dance Festival's favored competitor. Since she was a royal, it stood to reason that she'd have her own personal area for combat practice.

No, perhaps that's not true.

The Integrated Human Empire's ruling class had a somewhat different position compared to the kings and queens Leonis had known a thousand years ago.

"My apologies for disturbing your drills. It was an emergency. Carbuncle is a

spirit that belongs to the royal family. We couldn't afford to let anything happening to it."

Chatres briefly thanked the eighteenth platoon for recovering the creature. Apparently, she really had destroyed the walls with her Holy Sword. That spoke of tremendous destructive power, but what else did the princess's weapon have in store?

"So where is Carbuncle...?" Chatres looked around.

"Ah, we caught it over here."

Regina, Sakuya, and Elfiné approached, walking over the ruined walls. The glowing spirit was cradled in Regina's arms. Despite hopping around just moments ago, it was now curled up, obedient and placid.

"...Carbuncle!" Altiria called out.

As Regina approached, the spirit hopped from her to Altiria.

"Oh, why did you do that?" Altiria chided the little spirit, puffing up her cheeks in an adorable pout. "You just ran off all of a sudden..." The princess turned to Regina and bowed her head. "Thank you very much for catching it."

"O-oh, no, it was nothing. Perish the thought," a flustered Regina responded, speaking in a tone that reminded Leonis of Fenris.

Come to think of it, this is her first time meeting her younger sister face-to-face.

The two had never met directly during the incident aboard the *Hyperion*.

"You know, it's strange," Altiria remarked, puzzled. "Carbuncle doesn't let anyone else hold it but me..."

"Q-quite odd, indeed! Ohoho!" Regina responded with a strange, high-pitched tone.

Carbuncle had fought alongside Regina during the seajacking. Perhaps the spirit had sensed Regina's presence and run off to meet her.

Altiria looked around, gazing at the members of the eighteenth platoon.

"I've been wanting to thank you all personally for the longest time," she said.

“I went unconscious and can’t quite remember what happened, but I know you all fought bravely to save my life.”

She pinched up the hems of her dress in a curtsy and lowered her head.

“Not at all, Princess,” Riselia answered, bowing as a retainer would. “Protecting you is a Holy Swordswoman’s duty.”

“As Altiria’s older sister, allow me to offer my gratitude as well.” Chatres dipped her head briefly.

Her blond hair, like the color of a stewartia flower, fell over her cheeks. Like Altiria and Regina, she was a very beautiful woman, but her jade eyes gave off something cold.

In terms of my subordinates, she reminds me of Iris, the Dark Priestess, Leonis mused.

Noticing his gaze, Chatres eyed Leonis and cocked an eyebrow.

“Excalibur Academy uniform...,” she muttered. “Don’t tell me you have a child in your platoon.”

“Yes, he’s a child, but he’s one of our team’s aces,” Elfiné said.

“What?” Chatres glared at Leonis sharply. “Impossible. You may be a special entry, but do you intend to make a mockery of the Holy Sword Dance Festival?”

“Chatres!” Altiria scolded, yet the older sister’s glare remained hard and judging.



You are lucky that I am a magnanimous Dark Lord who will overlook this insult.

Were she to say that to Gazoth, the Lord of Beasts, or Veira, they would have reduced her to ashes for her blasphemous remarks. By contrast, Leonis believed ignorance wasn't a sin, if shameful.

Keep on looking down on me, if you will. But you will regret it when you come to learn of my true identity.

"Hmm. Princess, if I may..."

To Leonis's surprise, someone was willing to argue with this princess—Riselia.

"Nn?" Chatres crossed her arms and looked down at the argent-haired girl. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you Duke Crystalia's daughter...?"

"Yes. I'm Riselia Crystalia, one of Excalibur Academy's representatives." Riselia's ice-blue eyes met Chatres's evenly.

"I harbor a great deal of respect for Duke Crystalia, the hero of the Third Assault Garden," Chatres stated. "But that doesn't mean I acknowledge you. Don't disgrace me with a pathetic match."

"Yes, Your Highness. I look forward to facing you," Riselia replied with an uncharacteristically provocative tone.

Is she mad?

Upon closer inspection, Leonis noticed that Riselia's silver hair glowed faintly with mana. It seemed even the usually serious and kind Riselia was capable of anger. And while Chatres wasn't overwhelmed by Riselia's silent indignation...

"Let's go, Altiria."

...she still turned on her heel and made for the exit.

"Ah, Chatres," Altiria implored, trying to stop her sister. When she saw it was futile, she faced Leonis and the others. "I'm sorry if my sister offended you. Hmm, I'd be happy to meet you all again..."

"Yes, Your Highness. I'm sure we'll see each other during the Holy Sword Dance Festival." Riselia bowed slightly.

“I’m looking forward to it...” The princess’s cheeks turned very rosy. “Especially to seeing you, Leonis...”

She bobbed her head bashfully to the boy and scurried off after her sister.

“...?” Leonis cocked his head, baffled.

“You really are going to be a Dark Lord in the bedroom, aren’t you,” Regina remarked, a bit irked.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“Exactly what it sounds like,” Regina retorted with a shrug, and she watched Altiria depart. There was a slightly wistful smile on her lips. Regina was strictly forbidden from revealing her true heritage. As a cursed princess born under the sign of the terrible Star of Calamity, she wasn’t permitted to exist in this world as her true self.

Riselia placed a sympathetic hand on Regina’s shoulder. “Come on. Let’s continue our training.”

CHAPTER 4

OMEN OF A COMING STORM

At last, practice was finished for the day.

The fourth princess's sudden visit was an unexpected event, but the eighteenth platoon mostly completed the schedule Riselia had set. Leonis expected the first day of their training camp to have a lighter regimen, but it ended up being fairly heavy.

Elfiné was out of breath, which made sense since she usually skipped out on stamina exercises, but Regina had also collapsed on the ground, gasping for breath.

The human body is so troublesome.

Leonis, who had only a ten-year-old's stamina unless he used sorcery to reinforce his body, was also quite exhausted. The only ones who were okay were Sakuya, who looked perfectly fine, and Riselia.

I'm starting to miss my undead body.

He eyed his undead minion, who wasn't showing any signs of fatigue, with envious eyes.

"I prepared more thorough practice for everyone tomorrow!" Riselia said enthusiastically.

"Ugh... Lady Selia, are you sure we're not doing too much...?" Regina asked feebly.

"We have less than a week for the Holy Sword Dance Festival. Besides, Miss Finé went to such lengths to get us such a wonderful facility!" Riselia exclaimed, placing a hand on her waist proudly. "Although I guess overexerting won't be good for us. I'll extend our lunch break."

Regina's expression lit up at once.

“Oh! Then I think I’ll get a massage at the hotel. Wanna come with me, Miss Finé?”

“Hmm. Yes, let’s go together later.” Elfiné nodded, rubbing her hips.

“I’ll go hunting for taiyaki in the capital,” Sakuya said, vanishing Raikirimaru into thin air and pulling out a guidebook from her pocket.

...How do you hunt for taiyaki, exactly? Leonis wondered dryly.

“Okay... What about you, Leo?” Riselia questioned.

The Dark Lord paused for thought. He’d never experienced a massage offered by a high-class resort before. However, he got the feeling that if he went to get one, Shary would get mad and insist that giving him massages was her job... Which left investigating the capital.

“I think I’ll go take in the sights of the Central Garden,” Leonis decided.

“All right. I’ll show you around, then,” Riselia replied.

“You know your way around the capital, Miss Selia?”

“Yes.” Riselia bobbed her head and held up an index finger. “I’ve come here a few times with my father on official business. I can show you around the Central Garden’s famous spots.”



Riselia and Leonis rented a small vehicle from the hotel and drove over to the Central Garden. While holding on to Riselia’s waist, Leonis watched the city scenery sail past him. Much like the Seventh Assault Garden, the streets were lined with roadside trees for water filtering.

“Is that building the palace?” Leonis inquired, pointing at a gigantic structure visible in the distance.

It was studded with countless towering spires, like a stonework castle. It stood out among the laminated structures of the area, and it seemed like there was a clear history and tradition to it.

“That’s right. Apparently, this castle existed before the empire was established, and it was broken off into blocks and moved here,” Riselia explained. “The interior has been reconstructed, of course.”

“So the emperor lives there?” Leonis asked.

“The royals live in a different estate. The palace is only used for government affairs.”

Hmm. It seems they make clear distinctions between those two aspects.

A thousand years ago, human kings lived in rooms within the palace.

Leonis brought up another question. “Where are the military facilities?”

“The royal guard’s garrison is on the palace grounds. Their primary tasks are guarding the palace and the three royal houses. Large-scale military facilities for fighting the Voids are concentrated on floats two, four, and nine. Of course, there are also units stationed on each of the others.”

“I see.”

The two left the main street and went into a park plaza atop a gently sloping hill.

“This is the victory memorial square,” Riselia said. “Sixty-two years ago, the emperor and the Holy Sword Knights beat the Void forces. My grandfather took part in the battle, too.”

“Then that statue over there is of the emperor?” Leonis cast his gaze to the center of the plaza, where a gigantic statue of a young man bravely wielding a sword stood.

“Yes, it’s a re-creation of His Grace manifesting his Holy Sword, Excalibur. The emperor’s Excalibur still remains the strongest of all confirmed Holy Swords.”

“...”

Excalibur. A Holy Sword with the same name as the one Leonis manifested.

“Hmm. Is it possible for the same Holy Sword to reside with two different people?” Leonis questioned gingerly.

“I’m...not sure,” Riselia replied. “Plenty of Holy Swords have similar abilities, but I’ve never heard of two people manifesting the same one.”

“Really?”

Leonis’s Holy Sword wasn’t shaped like a blade but, rather, a pistol. Maybe it

was just a coincidence, and the inscription on the weapon was a coincidence.

I need to investigate my Holy Sword more thoroughly.

As they drove through the city, a building with a distinct octagonal roof stood out. This was the cathedral for the Human Church, the official religion of the Human Empire. The Human Church was a fundamentally different faith compared to the Holy Sect the Dark Lords' Armies had faced a thousand years ago.

In this era, humanity was ignorant of the existence of the Luminous Powers that once reigned supreme over the world. Instead, the Human Church worshipped the power of the planet, which was said to be the source of the Holy Swords' strength. Additionally, the Human Church was established alongside the Human Integration Project and accepted other people's faiths, integrating their beliefs.

A more exclusive faith would likely have failed to unify all of humanity.

A religion meant to rally all people together, eh...? The Holy Sect has brought me much grief in the past, but perhaps I won't have to crush this new kind of worship.

For the time being, the Human Church wasn't an enemy to Leonis's reformed Dark Lords' Armies.

But Nefakess Reizaad is masquerading as a priest.

Much like how Leonis hid as an Excalibur Academy student, Nefakess played the part of a holy man to blend in with the humans.

Or perhaps the Human Church is under his control...

Since Leonis was at headquarters in the capital, it was the perfect chance to confirm the truth.

As they passed through the plaza, Riselia and Leonis came to another wide road lined with tall buildings. "Are you hungry, Leo?" Riselia asked, slowing the vehicle down.

"...Y-yes, I suppose I am."

Leonis had kept quiet about it to save face in front of his minion, but he was

pretty famished after the morning's intense activities.

"Then why don't we stop somewhere for lunch?"

Riselia parked the vehicle on the shoulder of the road and looked around.

"What do you want to eat, Leo? Hmm. I'll admit I'm not very familiar with the capital's stores..."

"You can leave that to me," Leonis said, gallantly retrieving his terminal. "I had my eyes set on a few promising spots."

"Huhhh?!" Riselia looked surprised. "Leo, when did you start acting like one of those popular boys?!"

"Hmm." Leonis nodded vaguely and called up information from Shary's list of the top 100 eateries in the area.



The world still looks a bit warped to me.

The meeting plaza of the Central Garden's underground station twisted and spun with possibilities.

Sakuya returned her eye patch over her shining, amber-colored eye. It no longer throbbed with agonizing pain like before, but since using it made multiple possible futures overlap in her field of vision, she couldn't very well have it active during her day-to-day life.

He said I'll get used to it in time, but...

Zol Vadis—the so-called Dark Lord who controlled the Seventh Assault Garden from the shadows. He was the one who had bequeathed to her this mystic eye of time. His identity was a mystery, but true to his title of Dark Lord, he certainly possessed overwhelming powers that surpassed human understanding.

When the Void Lord Shardark appeared and consumed the sealed Sakura Orchid guardian deity, it was the Dark Lord who single-handedly defeated the monster. That much was a fact.

I need more power.

To take revenge on the Voids, Sakuya had accepted the power of the Demon Sword into her body. Yet that still wasn't enough.

On the day of the most recent attack, a blue-haired swordswoman had appeared before Sakuya and unsealed Raijinki. It was Setsura, Sakuya's sister, who supposedly had died nine years ago. It would only be a matter of time before they crossed blades again. When that time came, Sakuya needed to be ready. She had to master this eye.

"Will I stop being human when I do?" she whispered mockingly, pressing a hand on the eye patch.

"Frost Age?" a voice called out to her from behind in the crowd.

Turning around, Sakuya found a girl in shorts and a jacket approaching her, waving her hand in a friendly manner. Long, slender limbs, tanned skin, and pointed ears. A dark elf...

Lena Darkleaf..., Sakuya recalled.

Lena was one of the commanders of the Demon Wolf Pack, a force under Zol Vadis's command. Next to her was another girl, her mouth covered by a cloth. Sakuya knew this to be Arle Kirlesio, an elf she'd met on the ruined Third Assault Garden.

She, too, had joined the Dark Lord's ranks. Her motives in doing so were a mystery to Sakuya, and the two had an unspoken understanding that neither would ask the other for their reasons... But surely, she had some goal.

"Hmm, what does 'Frost Age' mean?" Sakuya asked Lena.

"It's your code name for when we're operating in the city. I came up with it!" the dark elf explained proudly, puffing up her modest chest.

"I see..." Sakuya muttered dryly.

"Incidentally, my code name is Shadow," Lena explained. "And hers is Sword Fairy."

"Sword Fairy?" Sakuya repeated quietly, confused.

"I—I didn't come up with it..." Arle clarified, her cheeks flushing beneath her cloth.

“Well, fine. So am I supposed to guard you?” Sakuya asked.

Lena nodded. “Yes. After all, things could get very messy.”

The three of them were headed to the base of an anti-national terrorist organization hidden in the capital. There were many criminal and anarchist organizations hiding in Camelot’s shadows. The Dark Lord Zol Vadis wanted to unite all those groups under his control.

Lena was to handle negotiations, and Arle and Sakuya were there as bodyguards, and to show off their strength to the various criminal factions.

I do think Arle alone would have been enough for this, Sakuya thought.

Sakuya had once faced Arle Kirlesio in battle in the ruined city. Her skills were a match for Sakuya’s, if not greater, but this time Sakuya had to tag along, as it was a test of her loyalty to the Dark Lord.

“Will this take long?” Sakuya inquired.

Shrugging, Lena answered, “Depends on them.”

Sakuya felt guilty about abandoning her upperclassmen, but she would likely have to skip the afternoon training session.



Sitting on a bench beneath a shady tree, Elfiné linked her Eye of the Witch to her terminal. She was in a small park just outside the trial grounds. Since the area also doubled as an experimental plant, there were genetically modified ancient timbers growing in an orderly line.

Now then. Let the battle begin.

By using the equipment in the facility as a relay, Elfiné connected to the Astral Garden. Doing so was easy enough using the Eye of the Witch.

The only problems are the Phillet Company’s independent networks.

They were accessible only through special facilities in the Shangri-la Resort and the Phillet Company’s primary site on float four. They were completely disconnected from the outside network, so linking to them was challenging.

I’ll need Cait Sith to physically infiltrate the system.

Since it was exceedingly difficult for outsiders to gain admission to float four, Elfiné decided to ignore it for the time being and focused on taking control of the Shangri-la Resort first. She had the aquarium, casino, stadium, and theater to consider.

I'll have to prioritize the casino.

This was one place in the capital where gambling was considered legal. But that was only a front for wealthy citizens. Its true function was as a Phillet Company–owned meeting place for secret deals between the royalty and the nobility.

What's more, it was a stronghold owned by Elfiné's brother, Finzel Phillet. That meant that Elfiné would stand out if she tried to enter. Claiming she came to the casino to have fun wouldn't work as an excuse.

I should leave Cait Sith with someone.

But who was the best person for it? As Elfiné thought on it, she got a call on her terminal.

"...?!"

It wasn't one of the eighteenth platoon members. The ID code was unfamiliar. Elfiné had been careful and doubted anyone had caught her snooping.

"..."

With a hint of stress, she tapped on the terminal. And then...

"Ah, you finally picked up, Finé," a familiar voice greeted her.

"...Clauvia." Elfiné sighed. She nearly ended the call right there on impulse but reconsidered at the last second. Her sister had contacted her. Perhaps she had some information? Elfiné couldn't let her guard down, though. Clauvia was removed from the Phillet Company, much like Elfiné. However, that made her even more unpredictable than their older brothers, in a way.

"I see you're back in the capital."

"...I didn't come back here because you asked me to."

"You're participating in the Holy Sword Dance Festival, though, right?"

“Only by coincidence.”

“Heh-heh. You sure about that?” Elfiné could feel her sister grinning. **“Since you’ve come all the way to the capital, how do you feel about helping the emperor’s younger brother and me?”**

“Sorry, Clauvia, but I’m busy.”

“I see. Oh, well. Then let me give you a warning.”

“What warning?”

“Brother dearest is planning something for the Holy Sword Dance Festival.”

“Finzel?” Elfiné’s eyes widened in surprise. **“What’s he scheming?”**

“I’m afraid I don’t know that much. But you’d best be cautious. Especially if you go up against the Academia unit from the Fourth Assault Garden.”

The Academia was a Holy Swordsman–rearing facility established by the Phillet Company, and Finzel was enrolled there.

What is he plotting for the Holy Sword Dance Festival?

She couldn’t blindly believe what Clauvia had told her, but she had to be wary of the possibility that her warning was true.

“...Thank you for the warning.”

“Oh my. Did you just honestly thank me, Finé? ♪”

“I’m hanging up now, Clauvia.”

“Ah, wait! There’s one more thing!” Clauvia’s voice suddenly turned serious. **“Deinfraude Phillet—that monster—is back in the capital.”**

“...!” Elfiné’s fingers trembled at the mention of the name. Count Deinfraude Phillet was her father, the governor of the Fourth Assault Garden, the ruler of the Phillet Foundation, and...her mother’s killer.

“He was invited to spectate the Holy Sword Dance Festival. And Finé, he definitely knows you’re going to participate. So be careful.”

“U-understood,” Elfiné managed.

Clauvia ended the call. A moment later, Elfiné felt something hit her forehead. Overhead, the blue sky had clouded over, and rain had begun to fall.

That's strange. The Eye of the Witch predicted the weather should be clear until evening...

Black clouds moved in, and a flash of lightning crashed in the distance.



"Hmm, this place's food is so good!" Riselia cupped her cheeks in bliss as she tasted her clam pasta. "Your recommendation was right on the money, Leo. ♪"

"I'm glad to hear that," he replied, admittedly a bit relieved.

The restaurant Shary had recommended had a relaxed air; its interior design was tasteful, and the chef was quite skilled.

Hmm. Perhaps I should reassess my opinion of Shary's intelligence-gathering skills.

Leonis wished she would put that skill to use for matters other than food, but she did a good job this time.

I should reward her later. Would a Great Hell Medallion perhaps be too generous...?

"Leo, you've got something on your mouth." Riselia smiled and wiped his lips with a handkerchief.

"M-Miss Selia, I can take care of that on my own..." Leonis went red and turned his head away, yet she didn't stop.

"Ah, stay still... There, all better."



“Would you please stop treating me like a child?” Leonis grumbled, dejected.

“Heh-heh. You say that, Leo, but you’re eating the kids’ meal.”

“Huh?” Leonis looked down at his plate.

A ground beef steak and pasta, fried shrimp and fries, chicken stirred rice, and pudding for dessert... They were all foods he liked.

“N-no! I mean, yes, it does look like a kids’ meal, but this is a combination plate. The menu said so. Look! There’s no flag on the rice!” Leonis desperately tried to refute Riselia’s claim.

“But it says only kids ten and under can order this plate...” Riselia pointed at the menu with a strained smile.

“...What?!”

And indeed, it did say that in fine print.

C-curse you, Shary...!

This combination dish was listed in Shary’s report as a recommended meal. Shary likely meant no harm, of course. She’d merely suggested something that had all of Leonis’s favorites.

I suppose I’m at fault for not checking thoroughly.

Leonis took another bite of his steak. “Kids’ meal or no, it’s still very good,” he remarked with a dignified tone.

“Yes, that’s true.” Riselia nodded and giggled. Then she set aside her tableware in an orderly fashion. “We’ve still got some time. Is there anywhere you’d like to go, Leo?”

Well...” Leonis paused to think. “I’d like to see the Phillet Company building...”

As soon as he’d spoken the words, Riselia’s expression stiffened a little. She brought her lips to his ear and whispered, “Um, the Phillet Company main building isn’t in the Central Garden.”

“It isn’t?”

“No. Their building is on float four. The whole thing is company premises, and

all entries and departures are heavily monitored. Civilians aren't permitted inside at all."

"That sounds like an independent state."

Riselia nodded gravely. "The company operates independently of the empire's authorities, and it has extraterritoriality over float four."

So the only recourse is infiltration, then.

A white flash flooded the restaurant from the windows. Moments later, rolling thunder sounded in the distance, and rain fell.

"A storm? The Holy Swordsmen's weather forecast said it should be bright today." Riselia frowned with disbelief as she observed the dark clouds.

"I suppose we'll have to hold our afternoon training indoors," Leonis remarked.

Bwoooooooooooooosh!

The wind suddenly picked up, howling...

"...?!"

...and the restaurant's windows were blown in all at once.

CHAPTER 5

THE RAGING DRAGON COMETH

Something flew through the skies of the capital, bringing in its wake lightning, rain, and chaos. The violent gales shattered many buildings' windows.

"Leo!"

Riselia reflexively grabbed Leonis by the nape and pushed him to the ground a moment before shards of glass rained into the room.

"...Leo, are you...all right?"

"Y-yes."

Riselia's clear, ice-blue eyes peered at him with concern. Feeling his heart skip a beat, Leonis averted his gaze and got up.

What in the world happened?

He looked out the broken window. The streets were full of screaming citizens, and a siren blared. The noise was the signal of a Void attack.

"...Voids?"

"Let's go, Leo!" Riselia said sharply, and hopped out the empty frame.

"Miss Selia!" Leonis took off after her, standing on a chair to jump through the window after the girl.

The wind howled in the ears. Black clouds hung over all, and lightning arced across the air. The raging gales and rain beat against the face. Civilians rushed to the nearby underground shelters. Pavement was ruthlessly kicked up and overturned, and the destruction seemed to be moving in a straight line. The path indicated some kind of gigantic creature had passed through.

Something capable of causing such destruction just by flying past...?

Leonis scanned the wreckage, reinforcing his eyes with sorcery, then he

looked up to the sky.

Between the inky clouds that sparked and thundered, he spied something for an instant—a crimson wing, as red as raging flames.

What?!

Leonis squinted for a better look, and his expression stiffened. This was no Void. The Undead King could never mistake his fated nemesis.

It was Veira Dragon Lord's true form.

But that can't be—what is Veira doing here?!

She'd gone off to search for the Azure Hold at the bottom of the ocean.

"L-Leo, isn't that the monster that went on a rampage in the Seventh Assault Garden a while ago...?" Riselia asked.

Her vampire eyes had evidently recognized the dragon, too.

Leonis nodded, clenching his teeth. "So it seems."

Unlike last time, however, there was no sign that Veira was corrupted by Void miasma, nor were Void dragons emerging from cracks in reality.

Does this mean she hasn't been polluted?

"Grohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...!"

The dragon's howl shook the air. Her massive wings tore through the rain clouds, kicking up terrible winds.

Corrupted or not, it does seem as though she's gone mad.

Veira didn't look to be directly interested in destroying the city, but whatever she was doing was damaging the capital anyway. All the shutters on the large, laminated buildings were closed tight, shifting the entire city into anti-Void combat mode. Any provocation from Camelot would undoubtedly spur Veira to counterattack.

If that happened, the Dragon Lord's breath would reduce the entire area to ashes.

This isn't my kingdom, so whether Veira destroys the place is of no concern to

me, but... Losing the hotel where he was staying might prove troublesome. Besides, I did plan for this capital to serve as a base for the Dark Lords' Armies...

Leonis summoned the Staff of Sealed Sins from the shadow at his feet.

Seeing this, Riselia asked, "Leo?"

"I'll go stop that thing," Leonis said. "It's an old acquaintance of mine, after all."

"Acquaintance?" Riselia frowned, confused.

"I'm sorry, there's no time to explain."

Leonis turned his back to Riselia and started chanting a shadow crossing spell.

"Wait!" Riselia called out, manifesting the Bloody Sword in her hands. "I'll come with you!"

"No, that one is too dangerous for you." Leonis shook his head. "Miss Selia, wait for me here, please."

With that said, Leonis vanished into his shadow.

"—Leo!"

Riselia made to go after him, but...

"Somebody help me!"

...she stopped herself upon hearing a scream from nearby. Turning, Riselia spotted a young person trapped beneath an overturned vehicle.

"I'll be right over!" Riselia kicked off the ground, propelling herself forward with wings made of mana.



Leonis moved through the dark corners, going from building to building as the storm raged. Without shadow corridors established in the capital, his speed was less than desirable.

"What is that fool doing?!" he spat, annoyed.

Veira was circling the First Assault Garden. She hadn't directly struck at it yet, but her mere presence was enough to whip up considerable havoc. As a Dark

Lord who rivaled Leonis, if Veira were to launch a serious attack on the city, the streets would become a sea of flames.

Fortunately, the great dragon seemed content to circle, glaring at the artificial island below.

Is she...looking for something?

Leonis couldn't be certain, but that was his impression. What was she after, then?

Boom, boom, boom, boom!

Consecutive blasts shook the boy's ears. Red explosions lit the sky. The anti-Void defense system was attacking Veira.

You fools! Are you trying to incur the Dragon Lord's wrath?!

Veira reared her head back and breathed a stream of heat and flame.

Bwooooooooooosh!

The burning pillar swept through the anti-Void batteries.

"...?!"

"...ord, my lord...!" Leonis heard a voice call out to him telepathically.

"Shary?!" Leonis answered her call.

"Has the Dragon Lord gone mad?!"

"So it seems..." Leonis replied as he continued to jump between shadows. He'd seen Veira go berserk several times during their battles with the gods, but her behavior didn't match those previous instances.

It can't be... Is she under some kind of mental control?

Dragons, as a species, were graced with powerful magic resistance. It was unthinkable that a sorcerer could dominate the Dragon Lord's will.

"Regardless, we can't ignore this situation..."

If the capital and Excalibur Academy were to launch a serious attack on Veira, it would incur her wrath, and both cities would be bathed in fire.

"Wh-what are we going to do, my lord?!" Shary asked, her voice panicked.

She'd borne witness to the Dragon Lord's menacing power one thousand years ago.

"Shary, we're going to bury her in the Realm of Shadows!" Leonis stated.

A silent pause followed the Undead King's decree, but it was brief.

"Whaaaaat!? Th-the Dragon Lord?! She'll leave the Realm of Shadows in ruins!"

"That's preferable to letting her rampage here. We have no choice."

"B-but..."

"When I give the signal, open a gate. This is an order, Shary."

"...Very well. I'll begin preparations. Where shall I place the gate?"

"The Central Garden's match stadium. I'll guide the Dragon Lord there." Leonis landed on one tall building and brandished the Staff of Sealed Sins overhead. "Fifth-order spell—Buras Haibach!"

A malevolent glow emanated from the dragon eye jewel at the tip of the Staff of Sealed Sins—the Exorcism Wave, Buras Haibach. A radial, undulating mana surge covered the area in the blink of an eye. It didn't create any visible destruction, but the Undead King's intense mana rendered all the observation equipment in the area inoperable.

With this, there wouldn't be any record of Leonis's actions. It also meant all other magical apparatuses in the area would be disabled. However, that was a necessary sacrifice.

After this, Leonis chanted another spell.

"Eighth-order spell—Al Gu Belzelga!"

Booooooooooom!

A massive fireball collided with Veira. Its rupture sent tremors through the air. Unsurprisingly, the Dragon Lord was unharmed. A high-ranking dragon's scales could deflect even one of Leonis's eighth-order spells. Damaging Veira had never been the intention, though. The attack was meant to draw her attention, and it did so perfectly.

Veira's golden eyes gleamed menacingly at Leonis, who stood atop a building. Any ordinary person would've been rendered unconscious from the force of that look.

"I suppose it was foolish to hope that might rouse her from her frenzy." Leonis clicked his tongue. "Come at me, proud tyrant of the dragons!" he challenged.

"Grohhhhhhhhhhhh!"

A thundering roar issued from the crimson dragon's maw. Weaving between the shadows, Leonis teleported to an adjacent rooftop. No sooner had he done so than a stream of fire blew apart the building he'd been standing on a second earlier.

"Vira Zuo!" Leonis unleashed another eighth-order spell.

A cage of gravity formed around Veira, isolating her, but the furious creature broke free with a beat of her wings. Another beam of flame swept through some nearby structures.

Leonis hopped in the air, chanting a gravity spell. "Sixth-order spell—Gren Zo!"

Bam, bam, bam, bam!

Using the lightning bombardment magic to form a thick smoke screen, Leonis took cover. If Blackas had still been here, he'd have been able to engage the dragon in melee combat, but with Leonis's current body, all he could do was loose spells while keeping his distance.

The crimson dragon flapped her wings, blowing away the smoke at once, and a burning ray came racing toward Leonis.

"...?!"

The heat wave cut through the air, and Leonis used the tip of his staff to deflect it.

Hmph, it's as I assumed. She's under some kind of mental interference.

Even Leonis wouldn't be able to keep the Dragon Lord at bay for long. This was different from her merely being incensed. It was closer to a dazed, feverish

state.

“Zamd! Zamd! Zamd!”

While moving from different dark spots rapidly, Leonis fired third-order sorcery attacks. Such weak spells couldn’t damage the dragon, of course, but he wasn’t hurling them blindly. His plan was to lure Veira to the edge of the Central Garden.

“Grrr... Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Spreading its wings wide, the dragon glided through the air.

Now’s the time, Leonis thought as he landed on a tall building. The gigantic stadium was nearby.

“Shary, open the gate to the Realm of Shadows!”

“Yes, My lord!”

Blop... Blop. Blop... Blop, blop, blop...

Thick, palpable darkness formed in the center of the stadium, washing over it like mud. Pure, complete shadow, which offered no light. The walls of the stadium warped, melting into the ebon.

“Allow me to invite you to my Realm of Shadows, Dragon Lord.”

Leonis snapped his fingers, and the next moment, countless chains fired out of the gigantic dark portal, coiling around Veira.

“This is one of the Arc Seven, the Vile Dragon Fetter, Ragva Zol. Shazak Nare, the Thief God, stole it from the Divine Dragon of the Six Heroes, and later, I acquired it for myself. I can think of no better restraint against a tyrant like you than divine shackles made to defeat vile dragons.”

Leonis cackled with a vicious expression. With her body completely bound, Veira thrashed in vain as she was pulled into the darkness. A weaker creature might have slipped from Ragva Zol easily enough, but the mightier and larger the dragon, the stronger it was held.

Still, if Veira had been in full strength, she might have been able to free herself through sheer brute force. That she didn’t proved something was

wrong.

“Grrrrr... Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!”

“Settle down, you raging beast.”

Leonis cast the tenth-order spell, the Dark Burst Flare, Arzam.

Vrrrrrrrrrrnnnnnn!

As Veira continued to thrash and struggle, Leonis unleashed his finishing blow.



“...Leo...!”

Pillars of flames and crackling lightning scorched the sky. Smoke hung in the air, and even Riselia’s vampire-enhanced vision couldn’t make out what was happening.

Was Leonis still battling that gigantic dragon alone? The thought filled Riselia’s heart with forlornness. She bit her lip.

“W-wahhhhhhhhhh!” a child cried out from somewhere.

“...?!”

Filling the blood coursing through her body with mana, Riselia honed her senses to a keen edge. She located a kid squatting near a crumbled building and hurried to him.

“Are you all right...?” Riselia asked gently, bending over.

“*Sniff...* A...a Holy Swordswoman...?” Relief formed on the boy’s face when he saw his savior was wearing an Excalibur Academy uniform.

The child must have been separated from his parents in the chaos. He looked about the same height as Leonis and was likely close to his age.

That’s right... A normal ten-year-old would be frightened like this.

Interacting with Leonis for so long had made Riselia forget that obvious fact. She scanned the area with her vampiric eyesight, checking for any other people, yet she found none.

Riselia took the frightened boy's hand. "It's dangerous here. I'll escort you to the shelter."

The boy nodded, but then...

Creak... Creak, creak... Creak...

...there came a sound like terrible groaning, as though something were succumbing to an unbearable weight. Anxiety squirmed in Riselia's stomach, but she turned to look.

Craaaaaash!

The remains of the nearest building abruptly gave way, caving in.

"Bloody Slash!"

Riselia cleaved through the rubble using her Holy Sword's power. Small, thin blades of blood branched off from her blade, crushing everything tumbling at her and the boy.

"M-Miss Knight...?" the child asked.

"Let's get out of here. Don't worry, I'll protect you," Riselia assured him with a smile, and she swiftly escorted the boy to the shelter.



The Realm of Shadows—one of the seventy-seven territories under the Undead King, Leonis Death Magnus's control.

It was a world without color, its skies and land washed over with desolate gray. The realm's state was due to a curse placed by its former ruler, the Queen of Shadows. She was defeated by the combined efforts of the Prince of the Land of Shadows and the Undead King, but her power still lingered.

Leonis descended upon the bleak soil.

A black wolf revealed himself. "Lord Magnus, what happened? Why is the Dragon Lord here...?" It was Blackas, but his physique was visibly smaller than usual. He was still recovering from his wounds during the battle with Shardark. "The shadows longing to slumber in peace are crying out."

"My apologies, friend," Leonis said while looking around. "Circumstances

forced me to trap the Dragon Lord here.”

Veira must have thrashed against the Ragva Zol as she entered the Realm of Shadows. The desolate ground was melted, and small, mortar-shaped craters dotted the area. And at the center of the destruction...

...was a red-haired girl bound by innumerable chains. With the dragon-sealing bindings sapping her power, she'd returned to her humanoid form. Leonis approached her, staff still in his hand.

“M-my lord, it's too dangerous! You mustn't get that close!” Shary cried out behind him.

“...Don't worry,” Leonis replied, lowering his hand. “As she is now, Veira won't be able to break free.”

At the Undead King's gesture, Veira's body, which was suspended in midair, was slowly lowered to the ground. The savage light in her golden eyes was absent, and she stared vacantly.

“Does she not recognize me?”

As I feared, she's under some kind of mental interference. This wasn't accomplished with sorcery. So is some other power responsible...? Weakened or not, what could control a Dark Lord?

Nefakess and Zemein lacked the necessary strength. Even the Six Heroes' Holy Woman Tearis and Archsage Arakael couldn't take over a Dark Lord's mind.

I suppose I'll just have to ask her what happened.

Leonis approached the bound Veira, placing a hand over the girl's forehead. Mental interference spells were a field of sorcery Leonis called upon occasionally, but he wasn't particularly adept at the practice. All he could do was directly apply mana to Veira's consciousness to shock her. This method was forceful and momentarily weakened the victim's psyche, but Veira could take it.

“Wake up already, Dragon Lord.”

Mana coursed through Leonis's palm, scattering bluish sparks into the air.

“...Aaah, kuh, ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!” Veira's body spasmed, and she let out a scream. “...Ahhhh, ahhhhhhhhhhh... Wh-what—?”

“Mm?” Leonis looked at her quizzically.

Intensity returned to the Dragon Lord’s eyes.

“What...are you doing to meeeeeeeeeee?!”

“...?!”

Bwoooooooooosh!

Veira breathed flame, which Leonis reflexively blocked with a mana barrier.

“...Ugh... Hahhh, ahhhh... W-wait, Leo?” Veira gasped, then she blinked and cocked her head in surprise.

“Ugh,” Leonis sighed, dusting the ash from his uniform. “Finally, you’re back to your senses.”

“Huh? Wait... Wh-what is...this...?!” Veira swung her arms, rattling the chains, and she glared at her fellow Dark Lord.

“Don’t waste your energy,” Leonis told her. “Those binds are one of the Arc Seven. You won’t free yourself that easily.”

“Kuh...” Veira breathed out bitterly. “This is your Realm of Shadows, right? What do you intend to do with me?”

“Calm down. I’m the one asking the questions here,” Leonis stated. “What happened to you? I thought you were seeking the Azure Hold.”

“...Azure Hold?” Veira puzzled for a moment, and then her eyes shot wide. “I found the Lord of the Seas.”

“What?!” Leonis was taken aback by the mention of that name. “The Lord of the Seas? You mean Rivaiz Deep Sea?!”

Veira nodded. “Yes, it was her. No doubt about it.”

The Lord of the Seas—one of the Eight Dark Lords who governed over the seven demonic oceans. In terms of sheer combat prowess, she was perhaps the strongest of the eight.

She wasn’t so much a Dark Lord as a living calamity. Even the goddess Roselia couldn’t control the Lord of the Sea, and so she was forced to let Rivaiz act as she pleased.

So Rivaiz Deep Sea has returned as well.

Leonis found it hard to accept, but as Veira Dragon Lord, another of his fellow Dark Lords, had survived the past one thousand years, he couldn't write this off as impossible.

"She was sitting on my throne." Veira gritted her teeth bitterly. "She walked around in my castle, the palace where my dragon warriors slumbered, like she owned the place!"

Which meant the two of them had come to blows. Dragons were fiercely territorial.

"She wasn't willing to talk it out with you?"

"There was no point in even trying," Veira spat. "When did she ever listen to anyone?"

Not that you're one to talk, Leonis thought.

"I never could get a handle on what she was thinking anyway," Veira added.

"Rivaiz has ever been a mystery," Leonis mused. He'd fought alongside the Lord of the Seas before. But even among the Dark Lords, whose motivations were often baffling, Rivaiz's goals were exceptionally esoteric. However, there was something more baffling than Rivaiz's objective and apparent return.

"Was it the Lord of the Seas who placed you under mental domination?"

"...Mental domination?" Veira repeated, confused.

"You don't remember? You were completely senseless."

"I can tell I went on a rampage, but...why...?" Veira questioned herself, her expression contorted in agony.

Seems she's lost any memory of when she was controlled. Or, more likely, it was intentionally erased.

Leonis had a hard time accepting that the Lord of the Seas was the one who'd subjugated Veira's psyche. Rivaiz was among the strongest of the Dark Lords, but she was inept in what was considered binding sorcery.

Perhaps the one who had resurrected the Lord of the Seas was in the Azure

Hold as well? There were factions that aimed to revive the defeated Dark Lords in this era. Leonis's former subordinate, Zemein, had activated the Goddess Temple in Necrozoa in an attempt to resurrect the Undead King.

Whatever the case, we must approach this cautiously.

Veira's mind control had seemed incomplete, but the Lord of the Seas might have been entirely under some yet unknown agent's thrall.

Someone capable of dominating a Dark Lord.

It couldn't be...

Her image flashed in Leonis's mind for a moment, but he shook his head to banish that notion and moved on to the next topic at hand. "So why did you come to the capital?"

"Capi...tal?" Veira looked at him, baffled.

"This is the human capital. You must have come for some purpose."

Veira shook her head, crimson hair swaying. "I...don't know."

"Then you flew all the way here by coincidence?"

It was too far-fetched to believe. The capital was a large artificial island, yes, but the sea was far too vast for Veira to have discovered it by chance.

"From what I observed, you appeared to be looking for something," Leonis remarked pensively.

"Looking? What would I be—oh." Veira's face suddenly lit up in realization. "Hmm... Yes, well... Err."

"What? Did you remember what you were after?"

"N-no!" Veira went red for some reason and kicked Leonis hard in the shin. "It was happenstance. I flew this way by happenstance!"

"Ow! That hurt, what did you do that for?!" Leonis shouted.

"F-forget that, undo these chains already!"

The dragon-sealing fetters clattered as Veira glared at Leonis.

"What do you plan on doing?" Leonis knew the answer but asked anyway.

“What do you think? Dragons never let a grudge stand. I’m going to take the Azure Hold back.”

Leonis sighed, exasperated. “Do you have any means of defeating Rivaiz Deep Sea?”

The Lord of the Seas was the strongest Dark Lord in terms of individual combat prowess. And then there was the matter of the other person, the one who controlled her. Even for the mighty and tyrannical Dragon Lord, attacking without a plan was reckless.

“The Dragon Lord does not lose twice,” Veira growled ferociously.

“I, on the other hand, am the sort to experience many defeats and devise necessary plans,” Leonis said.

This was how the Undead King became powerful, in a different way compared to the Lord of the Seas.

After a tired exhale, Leonis snapped his fingers, and the chains of Ragva Zol tightened hard on Veira’s body.

“Kuh... Wh-what are you doing?!” the Dragon Lord croaked.



“Stay here and calm yourself for the time being,” Leonis instructed, and he turned on his heel.

“L-Leo, don’t you dare walk away...! Th-this is...humiliating! You’ll pay for this!”

Ignoring the Dragon Lord’s shouts, Leonis departed from the Realm of Shadows.

CHAPTER 6

ELFINÉ'S REQUEST

By the time Leonis emerged from the Realm of Shadows, the storm had already passed. There were still sirens blaring in the Central Garden, and the city remained in combat mode.

"She's always so much trouble." Leonis sighed as he patted the dust off his jacket.

Suddenly, the communication terminal in his pocket started beeping.

"—Leo, Leo, where are you? Come in—"

"Ah, Miss Selia... Don't worry, I'm fine."

"Leo..." Riselia sounded relieved upon hearing his reply. **"Oh, I was worried sick!"**

"I—I'm sorry. You can scold me later." Leonis meant that. His minion sounded...awfully upset.

I'll have to humor her later, won't I...? The thought brought a cold sweat to his nape.

"I'm just glad you're all right. Need me to come pick you up?"

"It's fine. I'll head back on my own. Let's meet at the hotel."

"Can you make it back on your own?"

"Don't worry. I can check the map on my terminal."

"Hmm..." Riselia paused for thought. **"Fine... Just be careful. You wouldn't want some stranger to kidnap you on the way back."**

"Y-yes, I will," Leonis replied with a strained smile.



Leonis moved swiftly through the shadows to return to the hotel, only to find the lobby of the Shangri-la Resort in an uproar. The attack hadn't damaged it,

but people were understandably panicked after seeing a dragon in the sky.

The news reported that a massive Void had appeared out of nowhere and, after causing some destruction in the Central Garden, vanished into the emptiness again. Since Leonis had destroyed all video devices, the broadcast was only the newscaster's voice.

He passed the lobby's identification check and returned to the eighteenth platoon's floor, looking as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Someone else must have arrived ahead of him, because the door to the meeting room was open.

"Ah, Leo." Elfiné, who was seated on a sofa, looked up from her terminal.

"You came back, Miss Elfiné."

"Yes. I heard the Central Garden's in a real bad state. Selia called earlier and said today's training is canceled."

Nodding, Leonis replied, "Yes, that makes sense." He took a seat on the sofa opposite Elfiné's.

"You want some juice, Leo?" the girl offered.

"Okay. Thank you."

"Give me a minute, then." Elfiné opened the door to the fridge. "Excalibur Academy's administration bureau sent me a request to investigate the gigantic Void's data, but there are no records of anything like it. Apparently, the Void released a powerful EMP barrage that fried all the magical apparatuses in the area."

"Oh...really?" Leonis asked, averting his gaze. "Hmm. Where are Miss Regina and Miss Sakuya?"

"Regina went to pick Selia up. As for Sakuya, I can't get in touch with her."

"It seems impossible to contact Miss Sakuya when she's out."

"She does tend to come and go like a cat, but I'm not worried about her." Elfiné shrugged with a sardonic smile.

Said cat was presently working alongside her fellow members of the Demon

Wolf Pack.

“Maybe I’ll try calling her,” Leonis remarked.

Before he could, Elfiné stopped him, as though she’d been waiting for the right time to mention something. “Leo...”

“...?” Leonis looked up, his fingers stopping just above the screen of his terminal. “Yes?”

“Hmm... I, erm, I wanted to ask you for a favor.”

“A favor...?”

Elfiné nodded and took a seat beside the boy. A few locks of her sleek black hair spilled over Leonis’s shoulder.

“M-Miss Elfiné?” Leonis felt his heart thump.

Elfiné’s drew close to his ear and whispered, “I want you to sneak my cat into the Shangri-la Resort’s casino.”

“...Your cat?” Leonis echoed softly.

“That’s right. It’s called Cait Sith.” Elfiné activated her terminal and held it up for Leonis to see.

A black feline appeared on the screen, rolling about.

“Is this an Artificial Elemental?” Leonis questioned.

Nodding, Elfiné replied, “I made it myself. It’s a spirit that operates in the Astral Garden. It infiltrates networks for me and gathers information like a cat hunting down prey.”

The Astral Garden was a network consisting of mana particles, forming a virtual space that functioned like an Assault Garden. Leonis honestly knew very little about the Astral Garden. He’d tried to investigate it in the past, but the magical technology that constituted it fundamentally differed from the sorcery used a thousand years ago.

“So why do you want to sneak this cat into the casino...?” he asked.

Elfiné dragged her finger along the monitor, moving Cait Sith away and shifting over to a bird’s-eye-view map of the Shangri-la Resort.

“This casino is used for more than just gambling. It’s a place for nobles to meet in secret, and there’s evidence that it’s being used to launder illegal funds, too. I might be able to get information related to the D Project there.”

“...I see.”

Even in ancient times, gambling dens used by the nobility were, in fact, clandestine social meeting hubs. When Leonis was still a human apprentice knight, his teacher, Shardark, once took him to such a place to stomp out a sinister conspiracy.

“But the Shangri-la Resort’s casino is detached from the Astral Garden, so it won’t be easy to access it from the outside.”

“I see. And that’s why you need to use the cat.”

“Yes, if Cait Sith can directly enter the casino’s magical apparatuses, I’ll be able to connect to it through the Eye of the Witch. I know I should be the one to do it, but—”

“If you go there, the Phillet Company might get suspicious,” Leonis finished, and Elfiné nodded.

“Can I ask you to do this for me, Leo?” Elfiné entreated, wearing a serious, earnest expression.

“...Very well. I can’t turn down a request from you, Miss Elfiné.”

Leonis owed her on a few accounts. Elfiné had seen footage of Leonis using snippets of his Dark Lord power, but she looked the other way and never disclosed the information to Excalibur Academy.

Besides, gaining information on the Demon Swords is something I’m interested in, too.

“Thank you, Leo,” Elfiné said, bowing in gratitude.

“Oh, no, don’t mention it.” Leonis shook his head lightly. “So what am I supposed to do exactly?”

“I’ll hand the cat over to you now.” Elfiné set to work operating her terminal. A moment later, Cait Sith vanished, instead appearing on Leonis’s terminal.

“Just activate your terminal near a magical apparatus in the casino. It’ll take about ten or so minutes for me to gain access. They confiscate terminals at the entrance to the casino, so make sure to hide yours well.”

“Understood. By the way...” Leonis had hit upon a wrinkle in this plan. “Are children allowed to enter the casino?”

“If you have an Excalibur Academy ID card, you should be able to enter with no problem.”

“I see. Come to think of it, Miss Sakuya does dabble in games of chance.”

“That was illegal gambling among students,” Elfiné corrected him.

“...I—I see.” Leonis got the feeling he should leave well enough alone when it came to this matter.



Upon returning to his room, Leonis sat on his bed and summoned Shary.

“You called, my lord?” The assassin maid rose from the shadow cast by the bed.

“Has Veira calmed down?” he asked.

“Yes, Lord Blackas is keeping a close eye on her.”

“Good. By the way, I need to ask you to handle something.”

“Order me as you will, my lord.” Shary pinched up the hems of her skirt in a reverent curtsy.

“I want you to infiltrate this resort’s casino before I do.”

“Understood. Who am I to assassinate?”

“This isn’t an assassination. I want you to record conversations among the nobles there.”

“Very well.”

“Ah, wait, take this with you.” Leonis stopped Shary just as she began to sink into the darkness. He reached for a box of doughnuts sitting on his bedside table and handed it to the girl.

“...?”

“Hmm, this is, well...a reward. Your research on the city’s restaurants proved helpful.”

“M-my lord...thank you so much! Your consideration is wasted on me.”

“Don’t worry about it. I leave the Dark Lords’ Armies’ future in your capable hands.”

“Yes! I will not disappoint you!”

Hugging the box of doughnuts, Shary gleefully vanished into the shadows.

“Phew...”

Leonis took off his shoes and lay on the bed. He’d considered entrusting Cait Sith to Shary, but Leonis was interested in this era’s casinos and elected to see it for himself. The establishment opened only after sunset, so he had some time.

While he was looking up at the ceiling, his thoughts wandered to what Veira had told him. The Lord of the Seas.

She was never the type to recklessly start quarrels with others.

Rivaiz rarely let her feelings show, and it was always impossible to discern her thoughts. As Dark Lords went, she wasn’t the bloodthirsty type who incited battles with her peers. That was more the tendency of the Dragon Lord, Lord of Beasts, and Lord of Rage.

I suppose her domain never bordering other Dark Lords’ territories was a factor...

Her relations with Leonis had been cordial overall in the past, and the two were even allies for a time.

What bothers me is this person who tried to dominate Veira.

Although she wasn’t at her full might anymore, there were still few who could drive her to a frenzy like that. Nefakess Reizaad, the Dark Lords’ Armies’ staff officer who seemed to be involved in the conspiracies working behind the scenes in this era, came to mind as a potential culprit. When Leonis had faced off against him in the ruined Third Assault Garden, Nefakess had chanted third-

order spells.

That measly priest couldn't possibly have that kind of power.

The one entity who could unquestionably control the Dark Lords was...

...Roselia.

If her reincarnated body had already awakened somewhere...

No. It couldn't be her. Leonis shook his head, denying the very idea. Roselia wouldn't try to seize control of Veira forcefully. *Regardless, I'll have to go and find out.*

The Azure Hold's resting place was quite a distance from the First Assault Garden. Even if Leonis were to ride his Skull Dragon, it would require over ten days.

"...And if I do that, I won't make it back in time for the Holy Sword Dance Festival."

"The what festival?"

"The Holy Sword Dance Festival. With the Skull Dragon's flight speed, it would take me at least... Mm?" Leonis paused and turned around. "What?!"

Crimson hair filled his field of vision, as well as golden eyes that glinted with a brutal glare. Standing on his bed imposingly was Veira Dragon Lord.

"Veira?! How long have you been here?!" Leonis exclaimed, hurriedly crawling away until his back hit the wall. "It can't be! How did you break the binds of the Ragva Zol?!"

"Hah! I shattered those chains with my dragon fangs!" Veira cackled ferociously, her teeth glinting. "You're much too weak to hold the likes of me captive!"

"...What about Blackas?!" Leonis pressed, alarmed.

"The dog? I bound him in your chains and left him on the ground."

"What...?!"

Leonis sent Blackas a telepathic message, but...

"Guh... Forgive me, Lord Magnus..." Blackas whimpered in his head.

"How dare you do that to my sworn friend!" Leonis glared at Veira. "I'll have you know, Blackas is the rightful prince of the Realm of Shadows!"

"Who cares? I'm the Dragon Lord," Veira replied arrogantly. Her attention strayed out the window. "Hmm. So this is humanity's greatest capital."

"Yes. It's humankind's final fortress against the Voids," Leonis replied as he stood.

"One section over there looks incomplete," Veira observed.

"That's because you destroyed it during your rampage," Leonis pointed out dryly.

Looking away awkwardly, Veira responded, "W-well...I do regret that."

"Oh?" Leonis shot back sarcastically. "So dragons actually have words of reflection in their vocabulary? Color me surprised."

"Are you trying to pick a fight with me?" Veira's crimson hair wavered up like fire.

"Hmph. It seems you're at least somewhat back to your old self, but you're still not fully recovered." Dark mana enshrouded Leonis as he summoned the Staff of Sealed Sins. "Perhaps I should trap you in the Realm of Shadows one more time, as revenge for what you did to Blackas!"

Just as it seemed a battle between two ancient Dark Lords would erupt in a hotel room...

"Leo, are you there?" The door to the room suddenly opened. "...Huh?"

...Riselia entered and saw the Undead King and the Dragon Lord standing on the bed. She blinked a few times, frozen in place with her hand on the doorknob.



"Ahhhh! Wh-what are *you* doing here?!" Riselia exclaimed, pointing fixedly at Veira.

"M-Miss Selia..." Leonis stammered.

This wasn't her first time meeting Veira. Once, they'd had a water-gun showdown at a pool. The heated match had been interrupted by a Demon Sword incident, leaving the result forever unknown.

"Oh, you're that girl from back then...," Veira remarked with innocent fascination, unfazed by Riselia glaring daggers at her. "Leo's minion."

"What?!" Riselia's eyes widened in shock. Her being his minion was supposed to be a secret.

"Leo, who... What is this girl?!"

Unable to provide an adequate explanation, Leonis only managed an "Erm..."

He couldn't tell Riselia that Veira was the dragon that had wrought havoc only a little while earlier. To his surprise and fear, the Dragon Lord herself seized the initiative and hopped off the bed.

"My name's Veira. I'm...Leo's minion." The crimson-haired girl suddenly made an unbelievable statement.

"You're Leo's...minion?!" Riselia parroted, positively stunned.

"You fool, what are you—" Leonis began.

The Dragon Lord turned to face him with a sadistic smile and whispered, "Hmm... Are you sure you want to finish that sentence?"

"What?" Leonis quietly replied.

"Do you want me to tell that girl I'm a Dark Lord, just like you?"

"Tch..." Leonis had no choice but to grit his teeth and fall silent.

"Th-that can't be... I mean, I'm...*I'm* Leo's minion...", Riselia said, her voice weak.

"Ohhh, so I guess that makes us fellow minions under the same master. Except..." A confident smile blossomed on Veira's face. "I knew him for ages before you did."

"Th-that's..." Poor Riselia floundered for a reply.

"It's true. Leo and I fought back-to-back countless times."

That much wasn't a lie. The Undead King and the Dragon Lord had joined forces to fight the Luminous Powers and the Six Heroes.

"He's even seen me in the nude. That's how close we are."

"What?!" Riselia's eyes widened in shock.

Technically, that was true as well. Whenever Veira was in her dragon form, she was naturally naked.

"Veira, stop teasing her!" Leonis chided quietly.

"W-well, I've taken baths with Leo before!" Riselia protested.

"Oh? Is that right?" Veira threw a glare at Leonis.

The Undead King averted his gaze. "N-not...every day..."

Finally, Riselia moved past the doorway and into the room proper, having finally gathered the courage to do so. "Leo, is what she's saying true? Is this girl, hmm...your minion...?" she asked, looking directly into his eyes.

"That's, well..." Leonis hesitated for a moment, mouth hanging open, before ultimately nodding. "It's true."

"...!"

"Leo summoned me to protect him," Veira added, puffing out her chest proudly.

"Protect him...?" Tears welled up in Riselia's ice-blue eyes.

"Ah, erm...Miss Selia?!" Leonis was confused by the unusual sight of his real minion's tears.

"Y-you summoned her...because...I'm not good enough to keep you safe..."

"N-no, that's not why!" Leonis denied hurriedly.

"I-it's...true...I couldn't do anything before, when the dragon was rampaging through the city..."

"Miss Selia, that's..."

During Veira's attack, Leonis had indeed left Riselia behind. He hadn't done so believing she would drag him down, though. It was a choice meant to keep her

safe. Evidently, that decision had hurt the girl's feelings.

Veira observed the exchange. "Hmm... You're awfully overprotective," she muttered, as though all the fun had been sucked out of her game.

"Mm?"

Before Leonis could press her for clarification, the terminal he'd placed on the bed suddenly started beeping.

"...eo, Leo." Elfiné's voice was coming from the device.

"Miss Elfiné?"

"Leo, the casino's about to open."

Leonis retrieved the terminal. "Understood."

"What's this about a casino, Leo?" Riselia inquired.

"Ah. Well, Miss Elfiné asked me for a favor."

"She did?"

"Yes," he answered. "She wants to infiltrate this gambling den because of a supposed connection to the D Project."

Riselia, bright girl that she was, quickly understood the situation.

"I'm coming along," she declared.

"But..."

"If you went alone, people might get suspicious if you don't have a grown-up watching over you, right?"

"...I suppose that's true."

It would be more convincing than a ten-year-old boy exploring a casino alone.

And this promises to be less perilous than the Dragon Lord's attack.

Even if something did happen, he'd be there to protect her.

"All right. Let's go together."

"Okay!" Riselia replied happily.

"Oh, that sounds like fun. I'll come along, too ♪," Veira added enthusiastically.

“There’s no need. Everything becomes a huge mess whenever you get involved,” Leonis stated coldly.

“What...what do you take me for?!”

“How about you reflect upon your actions before asking me that? What about your rematch with the Lord of the Seas?”

“W-well, my body still aches from what happened the first time.” Veira couldn’t look her fellow Dark Lord in the eye.

“Y-you two look close...,” Riselia grumbled, sulking.

Bitterly, Leonis thought, *This is going to be trouble.*

Refusing Veira wouldn’t stop her. She’d follow Leonis anyway. And if he left her unattended, he might return to find the hotel in ruins.

Keeping her close to make sure she doesn’t run wild might be the best option. Leonis sighed. Best option or not, it was hardly a preferable one.

“Listen to me. Don’t do anything too conspicuous, and no destroying anything. Are we clear?”

“I’ll try.”



Beneath the waves rested a massive Void colony known as a Void territory. No ship or Assault Garden dared cross such regions of the ocean, opting for detours.

The reason for the constant Void attacks wasn’t clear yet, but it was believed that Stampedes caused by Void Lords began in Void territories.

A colony of countless monsters of nothingness, emerging from cracks in space. Most people couldn’t imagine anything worse, yet that massive collection of Voids...was being swallowed by the sea itself.

Gigantic tentacles shot forward, consuming the misshapen creatures. Voids that only scarcely resembled marine life were torn effortlessly apart.

It was as if the ocean were lashing out at the Voids for defiling it with their presence.

At the core of this onslaught was a lone figure—Rivaiz Deep Sea, the Lord of the Seas.

The amethyst-haired girl gazed upon the atrocious carnage without so much as a twitch of an eyebrow. Her eyes stared forward, even and cool.

“It seems the Dragon Lord’s mental domination has been undone,” came an aging man’s voice.

“We’re not going after her anymore?”

“No. I know where the Dragon Lord is. She’s taken refuge in humankind’s final stronghold, the Imperial Capital.”

“Why did she go there?”

“That is yet unclear. The Dragon Lord’s actions are inexplicable.”

“...I see. Understood.” Rivaiz nodded lightly. “Then I’ll continue as is...”

The Lord of the Seas extended a hand forward, dragging the Voids and the entire Void territory into a massive whirlpool.



CHAPTER 7

CASINO MISSION

The sun dipped below the horizon, and stars began twinkling in the sky. Since ancient times, night was seen as belonging to the undead. Corpses would rise from the graveyards to wander the streets, and animated skeletons raised their swords on battlefields.

However, humanity had since conquered its fear of the dark, smiting it with the shining radiance of mana lamps. The Shangri-la Resort's pleasure quarter, Night Town, was on a floating island a short distance away from the hotel. Its flashy, colorful mana lights reflected against the gigantic pool's water.

This area, which opened only after sundown, was even more alive with activity than other streets during the daytime.

"L-Leo, should we really be in a place like this?" Riselia looked around, her hand anxiously gripping Leonis's.

Although this was Leonis's first time here, he was familiar with locales of a similar atmosphere.

Vices are the same, no matter where you go. The glorious Rognas Kingdom's castle town had also sported a pleasure district.

Lurking behind the ostentatious glow of Night Town's bright lights was a deep, viscous darkness. Yet standing at the brightest spot in the area, dotted with many of its own lights, was the massive structure of Casino Phillet Vomacht.

This twenty-two-story building had been named after the very first count of the Phillet family, and its first eighteen floors were all for gambling.

"Look at how pretty it is. I like this place." Veira raised her hands, beholding the ostentatious edifice with sparkling eyes.

She was dressed in a white camisole shirt and shorts, the same attire she

wore when Leonis took her on a tour of the Seventh Assault Garden's commercial district.

"...You think? It doesn't mesh with my tastes much," Leonis replied, raising an eyebrow. Be it in a human or an undead body, he found all these lights blinding. The silent depths of Necrozoa's Grand Mausoleum felt much more soothing.

But I suppose dragons are drawn to shiny things.

Many of them guarded over treasures in their dungeons, though they never put those treasures to use.

"Say, Leo..." Riselia spoke up.

"Yes?"

"What are we going to do about her ID?"

"ID?" Veira turned around, looking at the other two with curiosity.

"The guard at the gate can't let you in without an ID."

"Oh, that. Well, it'll work itself out," Leonis said dismissively.

"Work itself out...?" Riselia repeated, bemused.

"Leo, don't tell me you never taught your minion how to charm others using sorcery," Veira said, frowning.

"Er, well... No," Leonis replied awkwardly. "Charm sorcery is fairly advanced; it's too soon for her."

That was partially a lie. Charming was high-level magic, sure, but given its utility and compatibility with a Vampire Queen, there was precedence for Riselia to learn it right away despite the difficulty.

Why had Leonis refrained from teaching it, then? It was because of this odd, murky feeling Leonis couldn't quite understand. For some reason, the idea of Riselia bewitching others didn't sit well with him.

I suppose this is just selfishness on my part, he mused.

"Hmph. Fine. I'll just have to show this unskilled minion how it's done." Veira cast the other girl a proud grin.

“How what’s done?”

“Watch and see.”



The trio stood before Casino Phillet Vomacht. The blinding mana lights burned Leonis’s eyes.

“Shallow Grave, commencing the mission,” Leonis whispered into his communication terminal.

Shallow Grave was the Undead King’s code name when infiltrating enemy territory. Incidentally, Blackas’s code name was Creeping Shadow.

“Shallow...? Uh, yes, be careful,” Elfiné’s voice replied through the terminal, sounding a bit confused.

“L-Leo... Th-this is my first time going into a place like this...,” Riselia said, looking very flustered and tense.

“We’ll be fine,” Leonis assured her, squeezing her hand.

They passed through the lobby and held up their Excalibur Academy student IDs at the entrance gate. An attendant dressed in a tailcoat scanned their cards over a magical apparatus.

“Mr. Leonis Magnus? Everything seems to be in order.” The staffer bowed his head respectfully. “You are required to leave all information terminals here at the entrance.”

“Yes, here you are,” Leonis said, handing over the fake terminal Elfiné had prepared for him ahead of time.

Leonis had stored the terminal containing Cait Sith in the Realm of Shadows.

“Next will be you, miss...”

“O-okay!” Riselia replied, handing over her terminal.

“Hmm, the young lady over there...” The staff member turned to check Veira’s credentials next.

However...

“Let me through. Your lord orders that you let her pass.”

Shiiiiine—

...Veira's golden eyes shone with burning, ruby light.

"Ah... A-as you wish... Go...ahead—," the staff member stammered vacantly.

Riselia gawked. "Huh?!"

"Don't make a big deal out of it. A Vampire Queen should be able to do that, no problem," Veira told her smugly.

"I told you not to do anything conspicuous," Leonis chided her, sighing.

Having gained entry, the three took an elevator to the third floor and stepped out into a noisy, crowded hall. A fancy chandelier hung from the ceiling, and countless nobles were engaged in gambling and games of luck. Pretty women dressed in bunny outfits walked among the tables, carrying trays of drinks.

"Ah! Eek!" Riselia covered her face with her hands at the sight of the bunny girls. "This really is a place for grown-ups!"

"I think the way you dressed back during the Holy Light Festival was much more provocative, Miss Selia," Leonis whispered impishly.

"L-Leo, you dummy!" An embarrassed Riselia rained light punches on his shoulder.

This was payback for her forcing him to dress as a girl back then.

The trio made their way to a service counter, and after Riselia and Leonis showed their ID cards, they exchanged some of their credits for casino coins. Leonis offered half of his gambling currency to Veira.

"Take this and go play. But remember, no rampaging here," he warned her.

"One coin will do just fine." Veira flicked the little thing into the air and caught it. After a spin on her heels, she vanished into the crowd, waving good-bye.

"..." Riselia watched the Dragon Lord go, looking somehow anxious.

"All right, I need to take care of the mission. What are you going to do, Miss Selia?"

"Hmm, well..." Riselia brought a finger to her lips.

She seemed conflicted for a moment. Ultimately, she made a decision, nodding to herself.

“Leo...” She bent down to look at Leo at eye level.

He expected her to ask if Veira truly was his minion.

What do I tell her? Some part of him wanted to clear up the misunderstanding, but he couldn't reveal that Veira was one of the Dark Lords. Exposing her would reveal his identity as well.

“Leo, I know you have a lot of secrets, and that's fine. If you ever want to talk about it, I'll listen. So...” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I want you to rely on me more.” Riselia's clear, ice-blue eyes wavered, determined and a bit sad.

Rely on her?

This was something his minion had likely been grappling with for a while. Leonis recalled how Veira had called him overprotective. Perhaps overprotectiveness was just the other side of a lack of trust.

“...Understood. I'll try to depend on you more, Miss Selia,” Leonis replied.

The girl smiled and nodded. She straightened up with renewed vigor, silver hair fluttering.

“Where are you going, Miss Selia?”

“I'm off to have a duel,” she declared with a smile.

“Huh?”

Offering no more, Riselia paced away into the throng.

“M-Miss Selia, wait!”

Leonis nearly went off after her but stopped at the last moment.

I need to trust her, he reminded himself. *For now, I should focus on Miss Elfiné's mission.*

Leonis walked between the tables. All he needed to do was activate the terminal near one of the magical apparatuses in the casino, and Cait Sith would automatically sneak into the network. Unfortunately, there were no such magical apparatuses in sight.

So these are the devices known as slot machines...

He wove his way through the many people, looking around, when...

“Hello, little boy. You want some juice?”

...a pretty lady in a bunny suit approached with a drink tray.

“No, thank you,” Leonis declined politely.

“Oh, that uniform. Are you from Excalibur Academy?”

Leonis’s voice fell to a mumble. “Er, yes...”

“I see! Well, have a good time! ♪” The woman walked off to speak with another patron.

Fool. How dare she approach a Dark Lord such as myself so casually?

Not a moment later, another voice called to him.

“Um...”

“I don’t want any juice!” Leonis snapped angrily as he turned to face this latest irritation.

“E-e-excuse me, my lo—I mean, sir!”

“Wh—Shary?!”

Standing there, holding a tray of snacks, was none other than Shary. Her usual maid’s uniform was nowhere to be seen, however. She wore a hair band with bunny ears, a fluffy tail, and was dressed in a bunny suit complete with fishnet stockings. Coupled with her dusk-colored eyes, she looked like a real bunny.

“Sh-Shary, what is this...getup?!” Leonis demanded, astonished.

“Y-you ordered me to infiltrate this place, so I dressed appropriately!” Shary explained in an embarrassed manner, pouting all the while.

“R-right, I did tell you to do that. I suppose your usual attire would stand out too much.”

Leonis cleared his throat and picked up one of the sandwiches sitting on her platter. He ushered his assassin maid to a corner of the room while he ate.

“Did you gather any information?” Leonis whispered.

“Yes. There’s a secret room only chosen nobles can enter.”

“Hmm. I see. This really is more than just a casino.”

“So it would appear... *Omnom*,” Shary replied, taking a moment to munch on a sandwich herself.

Leonis raised a questioning eyebrow. “Shary, are you sure you’re allowed to eat that?”

“Mm... Is it a problem?” she replied indifferently.

“Well, it doesn’t matter to me. Which floors have active magical apparatuses?”

“Those would be the fourth, fifth, and seventh ones. Each offers different forms of gambling, but they’re all managed by the same Artificial Elemental.”



“Excellent. I’ll head to the upper floors, then. Continue your reconnaissance.”

“Understood!”

At Leonis’s order, Shary left him and returned to her duties.



Is it around here?

Getting off the elevator on the seventh floor, Riselia looked for Veira. Unlike the third level’s glamorous décor, the seventh looked more like a chic bar. The lighting was dim, but that didn’t matter to a Vampire Queen.

Riselia stood on the ends of her toes, scanning the area. She figured that Veira’s beauty and flame-like crimson hair would garner a lot of attention. And indeed, there was a crowd assembled around one of the back tables, with Veira as its center.

She was playing roulette and sipping a drink. Three mounds of coins sat before her on the table. A fact that the dealer did not look pleased about.

She only took one coin, though.

Riselia took a deep breath and, mustering all her courage, approached the table. By some unfortunate coincidence, Veira looked the other girl’s way right as she approached.

“Ah.” The sharp glint of Veira’s gaze made Riselia stiffen in place. There could be no faltering here, though. Not after she’d worked up the nerve.

To Riselia’s surprise, Veira smiled upon seeing her and beckoned with a hand. Clenching her fists, the argent-haired girl marched over. When she reached the table, Veira motioned for her to take an adjacent seat.

“Right here, minion girl.”

“It’s Riselia.” Ice-blue eyes peered unflinchingly into Veira’s golden ones. “Riselia Ray Crystalia. Leo’s guardian.”

“Right. Selia, was it?” Veira used the same nickname Leonis did. “I’m Veira. That said, few people recall my name anymore.”

“ ... ”

While Riselia settled into her chair, Veira called a waiter over.

“Get this girl a Bloody Rose cocktail.”

“N-no!” Riselia shook her head. “I—I’m only fifteen...!”

The undead couldn’t get intoxicated, but there were academy regulations to consider.

“You are?” Veira remarked. “For claiming to be his guardian, you’re still a child.”

“...You don’t look much older than me,” Riselia said indignantly.

The two had to be of similar age. Veira couldn’t have been more than a year or two older.

“You shouldn’t judge a book by its cover,” Veira stated with an alluring smile while sipping from a glass of liquor. “Get her some tomato juice.” With the order made, she directed her full attention at Riselia, golden eyes aglow. “So you wanted something?”

“Yes.” Riselia glared back stoutly, albeit with a hint of nervousness. “I want to challenge you to a match.”

“A match?” Veira licked her lips, interest showing through in her expression.

“Yes, that’s right. We have a score to settle.”

“We do?” Veira asked quizzically. “Oh... Yes, now I recall.”

The dim light couldn’t hide that Veira’s cheeks flushed slightly. During their water-shooting bout, Regina’s shot had knocked off the top of Veira’s swimsuit. Immediately after, a Demon Sword user crashed their battle, and their result was forever undecided.

“Fine, then. I’ll accept your challenge.” Veira nodded magnanimously. “But it’s no fun without risking something, right?”

Riselia’s eyes widened slightly. “Er, really?”

“Hey, I know.” Veira brought a finger to her well-shaped chin. “If I win, I get to keep Leo. How does that sound?”

“What?!” Riselia’s eyebrows shot up. “W-we can’t! Leo’s not an object! We

can't gamble for him!"

"We can't?"

"Of course not!"

"Hmm... Then how about we play for the position of his number one minion?"

"Wh-what does that mean...?"

"It's exactly as it sounds. Whoever wins gets to call herself his top subordinate."

"B-but that's..."

"I'll even throw in a little something extra," Veira added, holding up an index finger. "If you beat me, I'll tell you any one thing you want to know about Leo."

"...!" Riselia gasped and clutched a hand to her chest. "You know...secrets about Leo...?" she questioned.

"Of course I do," Veira stated confidently. "I've known him for much longer than you have."

"..."

"So what will it be? I don't mind either way."

"Fine," Riselia decided. "I agree to your terms. Let's do this."



"We'll play this game to decide our match. Do you know the rules?"

"Yes."

Veira tapped on the table with her fingertips. Roulette was a staple of casinos. The wheel had red and white slots, each with its own number. A dealer spun the wheel and sent in a ball. Customers staked coins on where the little sphere would land.

"And you?" Riselia asked.

"The dealer taught me earlier," Veira explained, toying with a piece of casino money in one hand. "Let's bet on the next game, shall we?"

"Okay." Riselia nodded and gazed at the table.

The dealer threw the ball in with practiced motions, and it spun around the many red and white slots.

I have to win this. Riselia clenched her fists.

This was a matter of feelings.

Veira isn't my true opponent here.

Riselia was up against something much vaguer—her timidity, her feelings of inferiority. This battle was about coming to terms with those emotions.

No, that's not it. If I keep avoiding how I really feel, it won't matter whether I win or lose, she realized. *I'm...jealous of her.*

The wheel of fate kept on turning. Riselia followed the ball carefully. After a deep breath, she called “White,” and placed three coins down.

“I’ll go with red, then,” Veira replied.

The dealer looked at the crimson-haired girl with genuine astonishment. Riselia stared with just as much surprise, and for a good reason. Veira was betting all of her coins.

“W-wait! I thought people go for multiple rounds with games like these!”

“Really? Is that the kind of match you want?”

“...” Riselia went silent, but she knew that Veira was right. Winning after multiple rounds would feel meaningless. “Fine. I bet all I have on white, then,” she declared, pushing all of her gambling money forward. She’d never intended to entrust this showdown to chance anyhow.

If I don't throw everything I've got at this, I won't stand a chance!

Beneath the dimmed lights, Riselia’s silvery hair shone faintly, fluttering as it filled with mana. Her ice-blue eyes took on a crimson hue. Under her gaze, the ball started accelerating.

“What...?!” The dealer raised his voice in shock.

“I’d expect nothing less,” Veira remarked, her golden eyes faintly shimmering as flames.

This time, the ball’s speed suddenly fell.

“...!”

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzt...!

Riselia’s mana clashed with Veira’s, and the roulette ball stopped dead where their powers met.

“...Kuh... Ugh!”

Riselia clenched her teeth, pumping more mana into the little sphere. Veira, however, remained cool. Casually traced a finger over the edge of her glass. “Hey, why won’t Leo try to dominate you?” she asked.

“What?”

“Don’t you think it’s strange? A pact seal makes it easy to control a minion.”

“Well...” Riselia wondered why Veira would broach a subject like that now.

“Wouldn’t it be easier for him to just make you completely obedient to him and use you like a disposable pawn?”

“L-Leo would never...do something like that...”

He never treated her as expendable, and often he threw himself into danger to save her.

“I see. Then I guess Leo expects you to fill some other kind of role.”

“Another...role?”

The ball spun about, enveloped in mana and scattering sparks into the air. Riselia had to focus, even when she spoke, to keep the little thing from falling into a red slot.

“Minions are meant to defend their liege, but you don’t have that kind of power.”

“...?! ”

Riselia faltered, and the ball was slowly pushed back.

“That’s... That’s not...!”

“However, there are minions with another purpose.” Veira’s tone was soft and kind, like she was guiding her opponent. “Some are permitted to speak

freely to their liege. They carry a duty to right their masters when they veer off the correct path, by risking their lives, if need be. Such servants are more than common underlings who obey orders blindly.”

“...!”

Riselia felt the mana pushing against hers suddenly vanish. The ball popped into the air...and dropped into a white spot.

“Looks like I lost.” Veira shrugged and pushed her mountain of coins to the dealer. “Well, I promised. I’ll tell you any one thing about Leo.”

“...” Riselia paused to think before finally selecting her question. “Can you tell me one thing Leo likes to eat?”

“...Are you sure that’s what you want to know?” Veira asked with a frown.

“Yes. Can you answer?”

“...Wh-why would I possibly know that?”

“All right. Let me tell you, then,” Riselia said with a little smile. “Leo likes ground beef steak and pasta.” With that, Riselia stood from the table.

“What about your coins?” Veira inquired.

“You can have them,” Riselia replied, walking off victoriously. Ultimately, she didn’t really care which of them was Leonis’s number one minion.

I guess I lost. Riselia shrugged. It was a bust. Yet at the same time, her heart felt lighter. She’d wanted to ask Veira a more serious question but elected to wait until Leo was ready to tell her himself.



“This is Shallow Grave. I’ve successfully snuck Cait Sith in.”

Having stepped out to an empty emergency staircase, Leonis made his report to Elfiné.

“Thank you, Leo. I’ll handle the rest.”

“I’ll be going back, then.”

Leo ended the call and stowed his terminal in a pocket of his uniform. The catlike Artificial Elemental no longer showed on the screen. By now, it had

probably gotten into the casino's network and was gathering information.

"A simple enough mission," Leonis muttered as he returned to the bustling hall.

"Ah, Leo!" Riselia, who'd apparently been looking for him, hurried over. "There you are. I couldn't find you anywhere. I was this close to asking a staffer to make an announcement."

"P-please don't! That's embarrassing!"

Riselia bent forward and whispered to him, "So did you do what Miss Fin  asked?"

"Yes, it's all done," Leonis replied quietly.

"Good. Let's get out of here, then."

"Yeah."

Truthfully, Leonis had hoped to increase his wealth with a few games, but Riselia didn't seem interested in sticking around longer than necessary.

"By the way...where's Veira?"

"Hmm, she's probably still drinking."

"Oh. Let's leave her to it, then." Leonis started to walk away, but Riselia grabbed his arm firmly.

"Miss Selia, please. I'm not a child," Leonis insisted, craning his head back to look up at her.

"...No."

Riselia held fast, refusing to let go.



It was dinnertime. The meeting room table was filled with Regina's homemade dishes. The platoon had eaten out on their first day, but restaurant food every day made for poor nutrition. Thus, Regina had whipped up a feast in the hotel kitchen.

When it came to eating right, her work couldn't be beat. Vegetable and clam soup, venison cooked in wine, whole wheat bread, udo and mushroom salad,

white fish marinade, penne gratin, and three kinds of cheese.

The Spirit Forest was one spot on the continent where Voids never appeared. It was a rare habitat for living wild animals and was more abundant with resources than the Seventh Assault Garden. Area VI had a float dedicated to aquaculture, providing the population with a supply of fresh fish.

Leonis reported on his mission's success.

"So you guys were out having fun while I was stuck cooking dinner?" Regina asked with clear envy. "Lady Selia going into a casino! If Duke Crystalia were still alive, he'd be scolding me nonstop."

"I—I didn't go there to play around!" Riselia protested.

"But speaking of, where did you go after we split up?" Leonis asked.

"Huh? Erm..." Riselia trailed off awkwardly.

"Ah! You were totally goofing off!" Regina exclaimed.

"Gambling, eh? I wish I could have gone, too," Sakuya remarked, listening with rapt attention.

Incidentally, according to Shary's report, the Sovereign Wolves' negotiations had fallen through. Sakuya and Arle had come to blows with the other group's guards. Veira's attack began in the middle of that, and both sides parted during the chaos.

The prospects of expanding the Dark Lords' Armies looked unpleasantly grim. It seemed that the Undead King himself would have to handle the negotiations.

Riselia took out a notebook and opened it to a page detailing a busy schedule. "I've adjusted our training regimen for tomorrow. I've also made appointments for matches with students from other schools, so we'll have sessions that'll be close to real combat!"



After a hearty meal, Leonis went to the bath. Much like the rest of the thirteenth floor, it was reserved for the eighteenth platoon. Initially, Leonis scoffed at the bath's pretentious name: the Starry Sky Palace. Yet true to its name, the washroom was set on a balcony that granted patrons a view of the

sea and the sky above. The bath itself didn't have a railing, creating the illusion of no border between it and the ocean.

"What a view." Leonis sighed as he settled into the steaming water. "It's a match for the Rognas Kingdom's hanging gardens."

A lot had transpired on his second day in Camelot, and although he was the Undead King, Leonis's body was still that of a ten-year-old. He was quite exhausted.

Well, that's mostly Veira's fault.

Stars dotted the sky overhead. At present, the Star of Calamity, which shone red as blood, wasn't visible.

Another matter to fret over...

Leonis had doubts about whether that star was even a genuine celestial body. Proper stars moved in set cycles, but there was no regularity for when that one deigned to appear.

Whether it held some correlation to the existence of the Voids was unknown. However, existing data suggested that whenever the Star of Calamity appeared, the chances of Void attacks went up.

Had that wicked star not appeared on the day of Regina's birth, she would be living as a princess. It had shone when Sakuya's homeland, the Sakura Orchid, was destroyed, too.

And also...

The Nothingness has chosen me as herald of the Star's gospel.

The world shall be reborn with the Star of Nothingness.

Leonis pondered Arakael Degradios's words.

There's no telling if he spoke of the Star of Calamity. The world and the heavens have changed in the past one thousand years. Would that I had access to the Azure Hold's astrological observation device, the Almagest. Then, perhaps, I'd be able to learn more.

An abrupt splash pulled him from contemplation.

“...Miss Selia?!” Leonis turned hurriedly toward the entrance, but there wasn’t anyone there. “...?”

“Over here, Leo,” a voice called to him from behind.

A nude woman sat with her legs crossed on the edge of the bath, illuminated by the faint moonlight. Her crimson, flame-like hair shone brilliantly in the dark.

It was Veira.

“...When did you get here?!”

“While you were looking at the stars. You didn’t notice me at all.”

Veira kicked up some water, splashing it at Leonis. Her leg was smooth and pale.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” Leonis sputtered out.

“Has seeing my fair body made your heart skip a beat?”

“Th-that would never happen!” the Undead King protested, yet he looked away with a beet-red face.

“Oh? Then are you disappointed that I’m not your minion girl?” Veira needled him.

“What...?”

Before Leonis could argue, Veira sank into the bath and swam over to him. Her red hair spread over the water’s surface like a crimson flower. Her head emerged directly before Leonis. Droplets fell from her face as she peered at Leonis with her glowing golden eyes.

“That girl challenged me in the casino, you know.”

“What?” Leonis narrowed his eyes. “For what purpose?”

Riselia hadn’t mentioned this at all.

“Who knows? Maybe it had to do with her pride.”

“Pride?”

“For such a good-looking thing, that girl’s a pretty sore loser.”

“Yes, that much I know,” Leonis replied.

Veira grinned. “She’s a promising minion. I like her.”

“She’s *my* minion.”

“Say, won’t you let me have her?”

Leonis shook his head. “No. Riselia Crystalia is mine.”

“...I see.” Veira glared at him and then leaned against the edge of the bath and muttered, “I’m jealous, though.”

Jealous?

It went without asking whom she was envious of.

Veira’s eyes peered into the horizon toward the Azure Hold, where dragon warriors lay in eternal slumber. Her minions had all perished during the battle with the Six Heroes. They’d sacrificed themselves to defend their castle and the Dragon Lord.

Even Veira, as merciless and tyrannical as she could be, was beloved by her servants.

“Are you leaving?” Leonis asked.

“Yes,” Veira replied, although her gaze remained where it was. “I can feel it. They’re coming after me.”

“I can’t sense anything,” Leonis remarked.

“A dragon’s senses are different from a human’s.” Veira finally looked away from the dark horizon. She placed a hand on Leonis’s cheek and then brought her face closer, pressing her forehead against his.

“V-Veira?” Leonis asked, stunned.

“It was your scent, Leo...,” she whispered. “When I lost myself in the Azure Hold, I... For some reason, your face came to mind.”

“...”

“I think my dragon instincts brought me here. I was unconsciously drawn to your scent—your mana from when you were a Dark Lord.”

Her fingers toyed with Leonis’s hair.

“H-hey...,” Leonis muttered.

“Hey, Leo... Before I go...”

“Leo? Is someone in there with you?” asked a familiar voice.

“...?!” Leonis jolted in place.

The door to the bath slid open. Leonis turned and saw Riselia stride in with only a towel concealing her body.

“Leo— Ah!” Riselia’s jaw dropped upon spotting Veira. “Wh-wh-what are you doing?!”

“Me? I’m just taking a bath with Leo,” Veira replied with a smile, raking a hand through her wet hair.

“Y-you can’t...!” Riselia puffed out her cheeks and hurried over.

She cast her towel aside and hurried into the bath.

“M-Miss Selia?! I, erm, I can see...your chest...”

Heedless of the remark, Riselia marched over to Leonis and wrapped her arms around him. The Dark Lord felt a slippery softness press against his back.

“Ah... Uh...” Leonis could only helplessly stiffen in place. His face turned deep red.

With an indignant expression on her face, Riselia glared at Veira. “You might be his number one minion, but I’m still Leo’s guardian!” she declared.

“M-Miss Selia, I can, hm, I can, feel...on my back...your chest...,” Leonis whispered in a fidgety manner, but Riselia only tightened her embrace.

“...”

Veira eyed the two of them. “Heh-heh... Fine, I get it, Miss Guardian.” She smiled. “You better protect Leo well, then.”

“...Huh?” Riselia was taken aback by the unusually calm reply.

Veira turned around and walked to the edge of the bath. Then she hopped atop the wall at the end.

“Ah, wait, that’s dangerous!” Riselia called out to her.

“Selia.” Veira turned around, her crimson hair fluttering. “The story about me being Leo’s minion was a lie.”

“...?”

“Leo and I are old friends—no, old rivals.”

Red flames billowed out from Veira’s body, enveloping her. The water in the bath evaporated into white steam, obscuring everything. And when it cleared...



“What...?!”

...the red-haired girl was gone.

Whoosh!

A massive, crimson dragon beat its wings and soared up into the starry night. A great surge of wind rattled all of the hotel’s windows.

“Wh-whaaaaaaat?!” Riselia exclaimed, the surprise finally getting her to release Leonis. “L-Leo, is that...the dragon from...?”

She pointed up at the great creature, trembling all the while.

No talking my way out of this one. Leonis sighed and shrugged.

“Yes, she’s an ancient being known as the Dragon Lord. She’s not human.”

“...The Dragon Lord.”

Veira flew off, leaving a beautiful trail of flames in her wake, like a shooting star.

“Where is she going?”

“To a battlefield,” Leonis replied.

“A battlefield...? What is she going to fight? The Voids?” Riselia asked.

“No, she will face...a far more terrible opponent.”

The Lord of the Seas—Rivaiz Deep Sea. The strongest of all Dark Lords.

Veira might match Rivaiz as a Dark Lord, but...

At present, the Dragon Lord had yet to regain her full strength, and the Lord of the Seas wasn’t going to be her only adversary.

Leonis’s astute minion noticed his tone and realized what he wanted. “Go with her, Leo,” she urged with a smile.

“Miss Selia...”

“She’s an old friend of yours, right?”

“...”

He’d never intended on letting Veira go alone, but he hadn’t known how to

tell Riselia. Her suggesting it was unexpected.

Leonis peered into Riselia's eyes. "I don't know if I'll be back in time for the Holy Sword Dance Festival."

"Are you going that far?"

"Yes..."

Leonis didn't know how close the Lord of the Seas was, but it had to be more than a day's journey. Likely more than two. Riselia seemed pensive for a moment and then patted Leonis on the head.

"Don't worry. I'll figure something out."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes. But..." Riselia brought her lips to Leonis's ear and whispered, "Come back as soon as you can."

"I will."

CHAPTER 8

THE DARK LORDS BATTLE

The crimson dragon sailed into the horizon, leaving a trail of flames in her wake. Her draconic instincts detected the massive being approaching from afar.

She doesn't even try to hide her presence. The arrogance.

The ocean stirred beneath. At this pace, Veira didn't expect to meet the enemy for at least another two days. Yet despite that distance, Rivaiz's influence on the ocean could still be felt.

In all my years, I've never had a serious battle with the Lord of the Seas.

Rivaiz was known as the strongest Dark Lord in terms of individual combat abilities. Just what kind of powers did she possess...?

Crack...

A fissure formed in the air directly ahead of the Dragon Lord.

Crack, crack, crack, crack!

The fractures in space soon covered the sky, and a repulsive shadow crept out of the hole they formed. A monster of emptiness shrouded in miasma—a Void. Veira hadn't known that she'd flown over one of several Void territories that dotted the ocean. Her draconic instincts informed her of the danger, though.

"A nest of those monsters...!"

A more cautious human would have tried to go around the Void territory. An animal would have been spurred to do so on instinct. However, Veira was the Dragon Lord—the strongest of her kind.

"—Irritating creatures. I'll reduce you to ashes!"

Bwoooooooooosh!

Flame surged, burning countless Voids away in the blink of an eye.

Crack, crack, crack...!

More tears formed in space, and the monsters of emptiness continued to emerge from them nonstop, heedless of their comrades' deaths.

"I don't have time for you fools!"

"Grohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

A howl echoed through the sky. With a flap of her wings, the dragon soared into the swarm of Voids. Gnashing her sharp fangs, she crushed the creatures. Her claws, enveloped in flame, tore into the larger monsters, and her mighty tail bashed their heads. Jets of fire illuminated the night sky, dying the ocean's surface red.

"...There's no end to them! Where do these vermin keep coming from?!"

The Voids' numbers were startling, and no matter how many Veira defeated, they kept coiling around her draconic body, trying to knock her down into the water.

But then...

"Celestial Stars in the Heaven, Judges and Executioners to the Haughty—," a voice could be heard from somewhere.

...countless powerful magic circles formed in the sky.

"Tenth-order large-area destructive spell—Zemexis Jyura!"

Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom...!

Meteors rained down on all the Voids, wiping them out. Gigantic pillars of water erupted as the sea boiled.

Veira looked up with a snarl, where she saw...

"Hmph. I've finally caught up to you. Perhaps I owe these monstrous Voids a word of thanks for slowing you down."

...a boy holding a staff. He rode atop a skull dragon's head and looked down at her arrogantly.

"...What are you doing here, Leo?!" Veira's dragon form shouted at him in the draconic tongue.

“I’ll be coming along. You can’t beat the Lord of the Seas on your own.”

“I refuse. This is my personal battle, as ruler of the Azure Hold.”

“No. This has piqued my interest. I’m curious, not of the Lord of the Seas, but of the one who dominated your mind. They might possess some information on the whereabouts of Roselia’s reincarnated body. Besides, it’d be troublesome if you were mind controlled and went berserk again.”

“...Th-that was just because I was careless!”

“Hmph. We don’t have time to bicker, Veira. More enemies are coming...!”

More tears opened around them, and Voids slithered out. Leonis kicked off his skull dragon’s snout and threw himself into a freefall before landing on Veira’s back with a thud.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” Veira protested. “Riding on the Dragon Lord’s back like I’m some kind of mule?! Blasphemy!”

“My skull dragon isn’t swift enough, but if I borrow the lauded Dragon Lord’s speed, I might make it back in time for the Holy Sword Dance Festival.” Leonis produced a pitch-black bridle from his shadow and wrapped it around Veira’s neck. It was a divine tool for harnessing all manner of demonic beasts.

“You think you can control me with this thing?” the Dragon Lord snapped.

“No, it just helps set the mood,” Leonis replied coolly.

“...I’ll shake you off.”

“That sounds like fun. Try it if you can. However...” Leonis directed his attention to the swarm of Voids before them. “We need to take care of these pests first!”



Gentle rays of sunlight shone in through the window.

“Mmf... Mmmfleo...?”

Lying atop her soft, fluffy bed, Riselia hugged her pillow tightly. Still half asleep, she sank her small fangs into the pillow. She wouldn’t get any blood from it, but kept at it anyhow.

After biting the pillow for some time, she woke up with a start. Leonis was nowhere to be seen.

Right, he left.

Riselia hugged and buried her face in the pillow. She then glanced at her terminal, but there were no records of his position. He was somewhere the mana network couldn't reach.

He's doing fine, right...?

She'd pushed him to aid Vieira, yet now she felt anxious. The thought of him embarking on some dangerous battle was an unpleasant one. Maybe if she'd begged him not to go, he'd have stayed behind with her.

Shaking her head to stave off the unpleasantness, Riselia rose from bed. She changed from her sleeping gown to her academy uniform and checked her schedule. Only six days remained until the Holy Sword Dance Festival began.

I should prepare formations that don't use Leo, in case he doesn't make it back in time...

She left for the shared kitchen to make herself some hot milk. However, something rustled in the kitchen.

“...?”

Riselia regarded the noise dubiously. Elfiné had rented out the entire floor for them, after all.

Maybe Regina's making breakfast? Riselia thought. It was dark yet, though—too early for breakfast.

“Regina?”

“Om nom non nom...”

“...”

There was Leonis, clad in his uniform, munching on doughnuts. Sakuya had bought those doughnuts as a present yesterday, and the paper bag was currently open in his hands.

“L-Leo?! Wh-wh-wh-what are you doing?!”

“Mha?!” Leonis jumped at Riselia’s shout and tumbled off the footstool he was sitting on.

“A-are you all right...? I mean, what are you doing here? What’s going on?” Although still confused, Riselia reached out to help Leonis to his feet.

“...Ah, erm...I am...fine...Miss Riselia,” Leonis answered clumsily.

There was clearly something off about the way he spoke. Leonis’s response felt oddly different from how he usually acted. After all, he never called her Riselia. To him, she was Selia.

“You’re not Leo,” she stated right away.

“Wh-what are you talking about, Miss Riselia?” Leonis asked evasively, averting his gaze.

“Leo always calls me ‘Selia,’” Riselia pointed out.

“Ah...” Leonis looked flustered, having realized his mistake.

It was obvious this was an impostor from how much he fidgeted when questioned. Riselia peered at the copycat suspiciously.

The fake Leonis gave up and sighed. “...Fine. It appears I’ve been had.” Getting to his feet, he straightened out his uniform and coughed dryly. “I am my lor—I mean, Leonis’s subordinate.”

“Leo’s subordinate?” Riselia echoed. She knew he called upon bone monsters at times. After all her training, Riselia was very familiar with the Three Champions of Rognas. But based on the way this person spoke, they weren’t one of those skeletal warriors.

“I have been ordered to act as my lor—as Leonis’s body double until he returns.”

“His body double...” Riselia nodded, convinced.

Leonis did occasionally use bone dolls to take his place. Mostly to skip out on lectures at Excalibur Academy.

He probably thinks I didn’t notice, though.

“And in the event he doesn’t return in time for the Holy Sword Dance Festival,

I am to participate in his place,” Leonis’s body double explained.

“Oh?” That part was a surprise to Riselia.

It seemed Leonis had planned for every contingency and taken measures in case of his absence.

“Understood.” Riselia held out her hand. “Let’s do our best to work together, then.”

“...” Leonis’s body double stared at Riselia’s palm for a moment. “Thank you, Miss Selia.”

The body double shook Riselia’s hand in a very reluctant manner.



He dreamed.

It was a vision of the time before he became the Undead King, when he was still a human boy. One day, he was charged with the mission of slaying a vile dragon and arrived at the Demon Dragon’s Mountain Range.

Just as he successfully slew a vile dragon, thunder crackled all around him, and *she* appeared before his eyes. A crimson dragon sailing proudly over the storm clouds.

The boy was exhausted and powerless. To him, that sight was the very symbol of death. Yet the moment he laid eyes on that dragon, a single thought crossed his mind.

What a...beautiful creature.

The dragon landed before the beaten and bruised child and opened its gaping maw. Leonis was prepared to die. But at the same time, he thought...

Maybe perishing to one so lovely isn’t that bad...

Perhaps she found his lack of fear in the face of death strange. Maybe it was just a whim. Whatever the reason, the dragon flew off.

Later on, Leonis’s master told him that dragon was the greatest on the peaks.

That moment may have been the boy’s first love.

It was a story from before she became a Dark Lord, and she likely didn’t

remember it anymore.



“Nn... Ugh...”

Leonis awoke to the bright light of dawn. Strong sunlight wouldn't have roused him when he was undead.

My word. A human body can be so inconvenient, Leonis grumbled. The only way to stave off fatigue in this form was to sleep. *And sleep means experiencing meaningless dreams.*

He and Veira had spent forty-eight hours flying over the ocean. This was the third time he'd seen the sun emerge on the horizon. He protected himself with a barrier of wind and used his shadow to stick himself in place, so there was no risk of falling off Veira, but a dragon's back wasn't exactly a comfortable place to sleep. Leonis sat up on Veira's hard, rough scales.

I hope Shary's doing well.

With the Three Champions of Rognas stationed at the Seventh Assault Garden, Shary was the only one he could rely on to serve as his body double for prolonged periods of time. Shary herself seemed quite pleased with the prospect of being free to eat Regina's sweets, though.

Leonis doubted she'd be exposed, yet he couldn't help feeling anxious.

“Are you up, Leo?” Veira spoke to him in the draconic language.

“Yes. I had a dream of the past.”

“...A dream?”

“Of the day I first saw you.”

“You mean the Dark Lords' Armies formation ceremony. The Six Dark Lords gathered before the goddess's altar and—”

“No. Not then.”

“Was there a time before that...?” Veira asked pensively.

“If you don't remember, that's fine.” Leonis shrugged.

“What are you saying? Well, forget it, we're almost there—”

“Yes...” Leonis got to his feet atop Veira’s back.

He could see a vast landmass growing nearer. On second glance, he realized it wasn’t a landmass.

“I hope you’re ready, Leo,” Veira said with an indomitable smirk.

“Of course I am,” Leonis said, summoning the Staff of Sealed Sins from the Realm of Shadows. “I can fight without restraint. No need to worry about being seen here.”

“*Grohhhhhhhhhhhhhh!*” Veira roared to mark the beginning of the fight.



It was as if the sea itself had a will of its own and was preparing to swallow the world. Its full length was imposing enough to match an Assault Garden’s linking float. Tendrils, reminiscent of a squid’s, writhed.

A destructive calamity that had consumed the ancient world’s fleets in a single night.

“Rivaiz Deep Sea.” Leonis muttered the Dark Lord’s name with a hint of respect in his voice.

Circling in the sky, Veira approached the gigantic shadow charging through the water. The Lord of the Seas was surely aware of them but didn’t seem to change her actions.

“Is she just going to wait and see? Then let’s greet her, shall we?” Leonis said. Mana converged at the top of his staff. “Eighth-order fire spell—Al Gu Belzelga!”

Bwooooooosh!

A direct hit. Leonis’s spell burst over Rivaiz’s body. Pillars of fire billowed up with a rumbling sound. However, the Lord of the Seas didn’t seem fazed in the slightest. She simply continued on her way.

“It didn’t do anything,” Veira commented.

“That’s absurd! There’s nothing to indicate she erected any defensive spells!”

The heat of Leonis’s attack had carbonized parts of Rivaiz’s body, but she

swiftly regenerated.

“This is going to get me nowhere... Veira, let’s go for a saturation attack!”

Veira answered Leonis’s call with a howl. She entered a nosedive toward the Lord of the Seas, breathing incandescent dragon fire. The crimson flames burned the water’s surface.

“Darkness, reduce my foes to ashes—tenth-order destruction spell, Azram!”

Bwooooooosh!

“Belze Farga!”

Leonis called upon the strongest spells in his arsenal, adding a series of explosion spells to the mix. Clouds of smoke hid the Lord of the Seas from sight.

“Don’t let her regenerate! Hit her with everything you’ve got!” Leonis cried.

“I know...!” Veira answered.

She soared up into the air and began chanting in the draconic language.

“Flames of ruin, heralds of world’s end! Ye fools, hear my roar—Dei Argh Dragray!”

A bright, shining beam of light blotted out the world.

Bwoooooooooooooooooooooosh!

The wind raged, and Leonis felt waves of heat wash over his skin. The sea seethed at once, evaporating into white steam.

“Hmph. How do you like th—”

Slash!

A blade of ice came flying and cut into one of Veira’s wings.

“Veira?!” Leonis exclaimed.

“...I’m fine! Hang on to my scales, Leo!”

Rivaiz’s tentacles loosed a barrage of spells, forcing Veira to avoid the storm of ice blades by making sharp turns in the air. The mana-laced frozen projectiles had been produced by a sixth-order spell—Sharia Shiez. And while a dragon’s scales could deflect almost any spell, they weren’t capable of completely

blocking physical cuts.

Leonis clung to his shadow for dear life, struggling not to fall off. Veira went from nosedives to sudden ascents to sharp turns, making the inner parts of Leonis's ears scream in pain.

"Ngaaaahh!"

"Leo, counterattack!"

"...Don't ask me for the impossible!"

Even if his body was reinforced by sorcery, he was still a ten-year-old. He could further bolster himself using Blackas's dark flames, but since the prince was still recovering, he'd left him to guard the capital.

Blades of ice that looked like translucent glass skimmed the red dragon's scales, cutting some free and sending them flying before they turned to flame and vanished.

"...Don't underestimate me!" Veira roared.

Shaking her head wildly, she loosed a horizontal barrage of fire. Rivaiz's charred tentacles fell into the water, kicking up great plumes. Yet those severed limbs restored themselves almost immediately.

"We're getting nowhere! Let's go...!" Veira exclaimed.

"You're going to charge her?!" Leonis exclaimed in disbelief.

"Yes. I'll gouge out her heart in one go...!"

Veira spread her wings and raced forward. The wind howled in Leonis's ears as they rapidly approached the Lord of the Seas.

This is reckless, but she's right. We won't stand a chance at this distance.

Holding the Staff of Sealed Sins in one hand, Leonis began chanting spells. He used an explosive third-order spell, Farga, to create a smoke screen. Concealed by the blasts, Veira continued her dive.

The Azure Hold hasn't appeared.

Leonis looked all around. The hostilities were well underway, but the true opponent hadn't appeared yet.

Are they observing from afar?

Perhaps they were hanging back to gauge Leonis's power, as he was an unexpected participant in this battle. Either way, Rivaiz had to be eliminated before they came to help her.

The Dragon Lord swept over Rivaiz's gigantic form, gouging into it with her claws. Leonis hopped off Veira's back and landed on the sea monster's body. But the moment he did, countless tentacles spouted and rushed at him.

"Frozen death, ye shadowy blades—Shaze Refisca!"

Leonis swept the Staff of Sealed Sins horizontally, unleashing a flurry of keen darkness that silently cut away the tentacles. Veira then breathed again, incinerating the limbs as they attempted to mend themselves.

"Come forth, Zolgstär Mezekis!"

Leonis held up his staff, forming a magic circle over his head. Innumerable swords appeared in the air. These were fragments of Zolgstär Mezekis, one of the Arc Seven, the Dark Lord-slaying weapons, which Leonis had shattered during his battle with Veira. He'd used sorcery to melt and reforge them into these weapons.

They were inferior, mass-produced versions of one of the Arc Seven. But even weakened as they were, they were still part of a weapon produced by the Luminous Powers to combat Dark Lords. Leonis swung down his arm, and...

Slash, slash, slash, slash, slash!

Thirteen swords enveloped in a malevolent glow stabbed into Rivaiz.

"Black lightning, smite down my foe—Vraz Go!"

An eighth-order lightning spell, the Cursed Lightning Storm.

"—Drag Deiraima!" Veira followed up his spell by launching a lightning spell of her own in draconic speech.

Black electricity joined with white. Balls of plasma burst with a deafening sound, and then...

"Ooh, ohhhhhhhhhhhh... Nng...!"

A moan issued from the horizon, as though the sea itself groaned. It wasn't the sound of death, but a war cry. An animalistic roar meant to intimidate an enemy.

"Here she comes," Leonis said.

"Yes," Veira growled from the depths of her throat. She could tell that the strongest Dark Lord had fully awakened.



A mass of flesh as large as a gigantic island undulated and throbbed, producing a bud of sinister-looking tentacles. They unfurled like a disgusting flower. And at the heart of this blossom was a girl.

Blue eyes as cold as the absolute zero of the ocean floor. Amethyst-colored hair, slightly glowing with mana.

"You finally show yourself...," Leonis whispered with a dauntless smile.

This was Rivaiz Deep Sea's true form. However, calling it her *original* form would be more apt. A sea sprite girl and a gigantic leviathan. The latter were sea monsters that stood at the apex of all life. They were capable of swallowing up anything in creation but lacked intelligence. Meanwhile, sea sprites were graced with high intellect and mana, yet they were physically frail creatures.

It was a combination of those two creatures that became known as the strongest Dark Lord.

"The Dragon Lord and...a human child?" The amethyst-haired sprite, Rivaiz, regarded Leonis with raised eyebrows. "Who are you?"

"I have no obligation to answer. Al Gu Belzelga!"

Leonis chanted the strongest eighth-order fire spell he knew, as if to say he wasn't going to bother with words. Massive fireballs surged in a spiral, consuming the tentacle flower and Rivaiz.

"Wintertide of swords, frozen blades of demonic ice—Sharianos!"

There came an incantation like a song.

"...?!"

The flames were snuffed, and a flurry of razor-sharp ice sped at the boy.

“Leo!” Veira moved to take the blow for Leonis.

“Grahhhhhhhhhhh!”

Veira’s scales shone with incandescent heat, evaporating the deadly ice.

“Get on, Leo!”

Leonis immediately jumped to Veira’s back, and the Dragon Lord kicked off against the leviathan’s rumbling form and took to the skies.

“I’ll give this girl a taste of the Dragon Lord’s strongest spell!” Veira snarled.

Leonis stopped her, though. “Wait. There’s something odd about the ocean.”

Rivaiz extended her hands to the sky and began chanting a song in the fae language. As though in reply, several massive tornadoes of water formed in the air.

“What?!” Veira exclaimed.

These were no ordinary twisters, of course. Each of them was charged with vast amounts of mana. And the next moment, the tornadoes all moved to converge on Veira and Leonis, like hunters pouncing on prey.

“Al Gu Belzelga!” Leonis hurled another powerful fire spell in retaliation. However, the crimson flames were swallowed by the tornadoes.

“What?!” Leonis exclaimed.

“Hang on tight, Leo!” Veira spread her wings wide, darting and turning to avoid the twisters.

The raging pillars of water had a greater attack range than expected, though, and they mercilessly gouged into Veira’s wings.

They can cut through a dragon’s wings with a mere touch?!

These tornadoes must have been a unique, personal spell formed from Rivaiz’s vast mana. Were they caught up in that, Veira would likely survive, but Leonis’s chances were far worse.

Glancing down, Leonis saw Rivaiz continuing her chant. The ocean heaved,

and more water cyclones formed.

If I could use Dáinsleif, I'd be able to cut them down along with the leviathan itself, but...

That weapon was bound by the goddess's contract. It couldn't be drawn against other Dark Lords.

A large-scale, top-class destructive spell might be effective against her...

The issue was, Rivaiz wasn't giving Leonis the time to invoke any magic. Both of his greatest weapons were unusable.

This is a deadlock...

It was then that Leonis recalled he possessed another power. The only question was whether he could actually call upon it now.

Veira flew through the air, weaving between the approaching water tornadoes. Razor-like liquid flew over Leonis's head.

"This is bad," Veira said, all the confidence gone from her voice. "We're surrounded."

Veira, with her dragon's high magic resistance, could force her way through those tornadoes without much effort. She knew that Leonis was more fragile, however, and thus she ignored that option.

This is a pretty unfavorable gamble. Still, Leonis made his choice. Their only means of survival was his mysterious new power. Leonis tossed the Staff of Sealed Sins into his shadow.

"Leo?" Veira questioned, puzzled by her fellow Dark Lord's actions.

"Veira, I need you to buy me some time."

"Do you have a plan that can beat her?"

"It's probably too loose to be called a plan. But I think it's worth betting on."

"Really? Well, I do love gambling," Veira replied, something like a smile in her tone.

Crimson mana enveloped Veira's gigantic form. She sped up, avoiding the tornadoes closing in from every direction.

Meanwhile, Leonis fixed his feet to his shadow, closed his eyes, and concentrated. His life was already in Veira's hands, so whether he saw what was coming or not was pointless. He brought his hands together and imagined its shape forming in his right hand.

His Holy Sword—the weapon he used to defeat Shardark Void Lord.

“Hmm... Well, you need to imagine it in your head. The shape of the Holy Sword and the way you would look holding it. Like, aiyah!”

Recalling how his minion had tried her hardest to explain it to him, Leonis couldn't help cracking a wry smile.

It was a pistol, a different sort of firearm from Regina's Holy Sword. This one could be gripped in a single hand. The first time Leonis saw a weapon like it was when he met Riselia in the Grand Mausoleum. Her back had been turned to him, argent hair flowing. A frail, weak human bravely stood to defend Leonis from the Voids, even though she'd only just met him. In her hand had been a mass-produced weapon based on Holy Swords.

*When I fought Shardark, I wished for power from the bottom of my heart...
The power to save Riselia Crystalia...!*

“Activate!”

In answer to Leonis's cry, something formed in his outstretched hand. Luminous motes converged, forming his Holy Sword.

It worked...

He could feel its weighty texture in his grip. It appeared unchanged from the last time he'd seen it. Shining blue letters were carved into its barrel, inscribing his Holy Sword with the name Excalibur XX.

Double X... A double contract, perhaps?

If so, then what did those agreements refer to? Who were they between?

Whether the name carried any significant meaning was still unknown, and there would be time for deducing that later. Leonis leveled his Holy Sword at Rivaiz Deep Sea below.

“Veira!” he shouted.

Realizing his intent, Veira swooped down into a nosedive. Weaving between the water tornadoes, she closed in on Rivaiz, who was standing at the leviathan's center. All the mana in Leonis's body converged in the gun barrel's tip.

Seeing Leonis hold up his Holy Sword, Rivaiz narrowed her eyes. Perhaps she sensed something.

"Lord of the Seas! Feel the power of my Holy Sword!"

Boooooom!

The shot lanced forth, and a white mana glow overtook Leonis's field of vision. It bore a gigantic hole in the leviathan's massive body. Sizzling blood flowed like lava into the surrounding sea.

"Haah, haah... Nng, haah...", Leonis breathed out painfully.

The sea sprite girl was nowhere to be found. The rumbling, swirling water tornadoes began to fall apart.



“You did it, Leo...,” Veira said. “What was that power, anywa—”

“No. Not yet,” Leonis cut in, his eyes fixed upon the crater beneath.

Rivaiz had realized the power of Leonis’s Holy Sword and retreated into the leviathan’s body. She hadn’t escaped completely unharmed, however.

Veira landed atop the leviathan. Tentacles whipped out to intercept her, but she easily slashed and chopped them away.

“We can’t let her recover. We need to finish her off while we can.”

Bwoooooosh!

Gigantic shadows appeared in the water around Leonis and Veira—quadruped dragons made entirely of water.

“Sea dragons?!” Leonis exclaimed.

“No. These are minions of the Lord of the Seas,” Veira clarified.

They were Origin Spirits that guarded Rivaiz’s Underwater Stronghold. Each of them individually was as strong as one of the Luminous Powers’ subordinate gods, placing them on the same level as Raijinki, the Sakura Orchid guardian deity whom Leonis had fought in the Seventh Assault Garden.

“This is bothersome.” The shot from his Holy Sword had greatly depleted Leonis’s mana.

“I’ll handle them,” Veira said. “You go after Rivaiz.”

“Very well.” Leonis nodded and threw himself into the crater.



The interior of the leviathan’s gigantic body rumbled eerily. Using a gravity spell, Leonis slowed his descent.

This Holy Sword’s power is much too challenging to control.

During the battle with Shardark, Leonis had unconsciously focused all his power into the attack, but this time, he was more cautious. Even so, his body screamed in pain and exhaustion.

Instructors at Excalibur Academy asserted that using a Holy Sword consumed

the power of one's soul. Describing it as such was terribly vague, illustrating how little humanity understood about Holy Swords.

Excalibur XX seemed to be a Holy Sword that drew upon mana, but that wasn't the only thing it consumed. Leonis couldn't tell if the other thing was his soul or his mental fortitude.

It's ironic that I, who once lost my soul and became undead, was granted such a weapon.

Leonis finally reached the bottom of the chasm his attack had gouged into the leviathan. The stench of burnt flesh hung heavily in the air.

"Holy Swords—weapons given to humanity to fight the Voids."

Leonis stopped in his tracks when he heard those words. Through the darkness, he spied a girl with amethyst-colored hair watching him expressionlessly. Her watery raiment was torn, and she was covered in wounds.

"What are you?" she demanded. "Are you...human?"

Leonis took a step forward, not bothering to answer. "Lord of the Seas, why have you returned? Who's pulling your strings?"

"It is I who am asking the questions here, insolent human...!"

A silvery light flashed for only a moment. Leonis reacted on reflex, moving to evade.

"...?!"

A shallow cut appeared on his shoulder, sending blood spurting from the wound.

...Was that her raiment?!

The watery garment hanging over the girl's body had become transparent blades, which shot forward to slash him.

"Tch..."

Leonis immediately began firing his Holy Sword in rapid succession. After repelling Rivaiz's attacks, he jumped back.

Wasn't Rivaiz unskilled in close-quarters combat...?

Leonis groaned and took a sharp breath. He hadn't thought using Excalibur XX would exhaust him this much.

Still, she's wary of my Holy Sword. That much is for sure.

In other words, this Holy Sword was a weapon capable of defeating the Lord of the Seas.

Rivaiz swung an arm, and her raiment became an invisible sword, which sped toward Leonis. Again, he fired repeatedly. Sparks popped in the air between the two Dark Lords.

The water blade protected her?!

It seemed this raiment was made to defend its wearer automatically, regardless of its master's will. It was likely a powerful item similar to Riselia's Bloody Sword.

"Then let's give it more opponents to defend against."

Leonis chanted his personal spell, Create Undead Army. Magic circles formed around him, summoning an army of undead—Elite Skeleton Warriors, Elite Skeleton Knights, Elite Skeleton Assassins, and Elite Skeleton Hounds.

"Fool. Deploying such weak troops against me is meaningless!"

The invisible water blades shot forth, crushing the undead fighters. Countless bones shattered. However, this was exactly as Leonis had intended.

"True. But your raiment will have to react to every single one of those soldiers, won't it?" Leonis remarked as he sprinted forward, firing his Holy Sword nonstop.

"What...?!"

If Leonis's soldiers truly were weak cannon fodder, the water raiment wouldn't have acknowledged them as a threat. While these skeletons were no match for the Three Champions of Rognas, they were still elite undead, and all of them were equipped with mass-produced copies of an Arc Seven.

Imitations of Zolgstär Mezekis were unquestionably weaker, but Rivaiz was injured. Even facsimiles of an authentic piece of the Arc Seven would be enough to wound her. Leonis used her raiment's traits against her.

A water blade nicked Leonis's neck, but he only ran faster.

"Hrahhhhhhhhhh!"

He fired repeatedly and without taking the time to aim properly. The raiment's attacks were broken, and shots were deflected with a flash. By using the skeleton soldiers as shields, Leonis gradually stripped Rivaiz Deep Sea of her defenses, pushing closer all the while.

Lord of the Seas, in the past you were certainly the strongest of the Dark Lords. Leonis sneered as he crept closer to her. *But that title is by now a thing of the past.*

The Undead King, Leonis Death Magnus, had known many defeats. They had granted him an awareness of his weaknesses and the capability to overcome them.

You grew far too confident in the leviathan's absolute power and, in your conceit, neglected to push yourself further.

"Eighth-order spell, Argh Varheiz!" Rivaiz chanted.

A massive whirlpool of water, capable of cutting through anything, ripped into Leonis's flesh. However, crimson flames erupted out from under his torn uniform! A red, glowing dragon scale deflected the eighth-order spell...!

This scale carried powerful magic resistance, for it belonged to Veira Dragon Lord! Leonis had taken it during the aerial battle and hid it underneath his clothes.

"...?!"

Rivaiz's eyes widened, with shock and marvel.

"Your conceit is why you will lose, Lord of the Seas!"

Loading the last of his mana into Excalibur XX, Leonis unleashed his final shot.



Leonis resurfaced to the sight of Veira ripping into an Origin Spirit with her fangs. The creature shaped like a water dragon disappeared with an agonized roar. Leonis had hurried back with the intent to help the Dragon Lord, but evidently, that was unnecessary.

Noticing Leonis's presence, Veira let out a victorious roar.

"Did you defeat Rivaiz, Leo?"

"Yes. I couldn't annihilate her completely, but she won't be doing much of anything for a long time," Leonis explained.

He'd never intended to slay her. There was still the matter of who was pulling her strings, after all.

With Rivaiz defeated, the leviathan stopped moving. They couldn't very well leave it here unattended, but if they attacked it now, it could go berserk, and that would be troublesome.

Just as it seemed the battle was over at last...

...Leonis heard a shattering sound, like a fissure running through glass.

Crack, crack, crack, crack...!

A massive crack had formed in the sky.

"Leo, that's...", Veira growled.

"So they've decided to make an appearance at last," Leonis muttered, confident.

A massive, deep-blue-colored structure emerged from the tear in space. The Azure Hold—Veira Dragon Lord's castle—had arrived.

However, the palace had not arrived alone. A lone figure floated ahead of it, a middle-aged man with a grizzled air about him. He peered down at the pair of Dark Lords with the sharp eyes of a hawk.

Gasping, Veira cautioned, "Leo, that's him."

"..."

The words went unheeded, for Leonis was staring wide-eyed in disbelief at this hovering man. He'd seen this person's visage once before, at Riselia's estate in the Third Assault Garden.

It can't be! How...? Why would this man be here...?!

Duke Crystalia—Edward Ray Crystalia.

The one who arrived with the Azure Hold was the spitting image of Riselia's father.

AFTERWORD

Everyone, thank you for waiting! This is Volume 7 of *The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy*!

This volume's story marks the beginning of the Imperial Capital arc. The story thus far could be seen as individual tales meant to introduce different character motivations. But from this volume onward, each of those character stories will converge with many mysteries being revealed.

Why do the apostles revive ancient Dark Lords and members of the Seven Heroes? What is the conspiracy brewing behind the scenes of the Holy Sword Dance Festival? There are many twists and turns in store! I hope you enjoy seeing how everything unfolds!

Now, for some thanks. To Asagi Tohsaka, thank you for making super-excellent illustrations for this volume! Thank you so much! All of your art is so lovely, but the best one is the spread of all the heroines in bunny costumes. I actually knew while writing this book that there wouldn't be a scene with all of them in bunny costumes, but I got on all fours and tearfully begged my editor, "I want to see theeeeeeeeem! I want to see Asagi Tohsaka draw the main girls in bunny outfiiiiiiits, bwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Thankfully, it worked. And now we have that wonderful piece of art. Some might think that the person writing this series is a real weirdo... But I have no regrets!

To Asuka Keigen, who's in charge of the manga version. Thank you so much for drawing such high-quality art for every issue. Volume 3 of the manga, which has Shary on the cover, is coming out at the same time as Volume 7 of the light novel, so be sure to pick them both up! I wrote some side stories for the manga, too!

To my editors and proofreaders: I know I've caused you a great deal of trouble this time. I'm very grateful for your patience!

And the biggest thanks go to all you readers! It's been two years since the first volume, and your support has been unwavering. Thank you very much! There was an autograph session in March. It was an online one, but even so, hearing words of gratitude from my readers was so heartwarming. We have lots of fun plans in store, so I hope you're excited!

Next time, the Holy Sword Dance Festival finally begins. Will Leonis return to Riselia and the others in time? And what of the figure who appeared with the Azure Hold?

Until then!

—Yu Shimizu, April 2021

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